

In the Works

Of Ships and Seaweed

Glenn R. Harbeck, AICP

I walked into the office of the consensus All-State planning director the other day. I couldn't help but notice two signs pinned to the wall over his work table. One said "Seaweed" and the other "Ships." There were several reports and plans arranged under each sign. My curiosity aroused, I asked about the significance of the signs.

The planning director said: "It's really quite simple. We have two sections in our department, with quite different ways of doing things. The Seaweed Section gets all the assignments that are ill-conceived, undesirable, and that generally we would like to see fall by the wayside. . . You know, the special election-year report for Commissioner Fusspot and that sort of thing. The Ship Section, you may have guessed, gets our important work, the stuff we would really like to see get implemented and that will have a lasting, positive impact on the community."

I said, "Where did you come up with the section names? I don't recall seeing them in the Greenbook."

Planning Director: "Well actually, I'm a sailor, and have always admired the work of the ancient ship builders in particular. They had a way of crafting basic materials into seaworthy vessels. Their process was resourceful and their results admirable. These graceful ships had both a sound structure and a clear purpose. Thus, the reports prepared by our Ship Section have many of the same characteristics.

On the other hand, there is our Seaweed Section. Seaweed, unlike the artfully crafted ship, has little apparent organization and no obvious form. It looks monotonous, with no part more important than any other. It seems to drift aimlessly and does not support much of anything. From a sailor's point of view, seaweed generally just fouls up whatever gets into it. As you might imagine, the reports prepared by our Seaweed Section lead the reader into a directionless mishmash where analysis, recommendations, policies and budgets are thrown into a product more closely resembling, well. . . seaweed.

So you can see, the two sections really are quite different. In fact, since we are on the subject, why don't I call in my two section chiefs so you can talk to them yourself?"

(Break and introductions)

Planning Director: "Getting back to our discussion—gentlemen, why don't you share with our friend here a few things about your approach to plan and report preparation? Let's start with the subject of executive summaries."

Seaweed: "We never use executive summaries. If we did, our decision-makers might not read the whole report and could miss out on some of the best justifications for our recommendations. Besides, planning issues are far too complex to reduce to a few words. When we do provide a summary, we usually make sure it is sandwiched somewhere between the body of the report and the appendices. We also have a complicated page numbering system, and we don't provide page numbers in our table of contents. That keeps the decision-makers from turning directly to the summary and perhaps missing out on some of our important research."

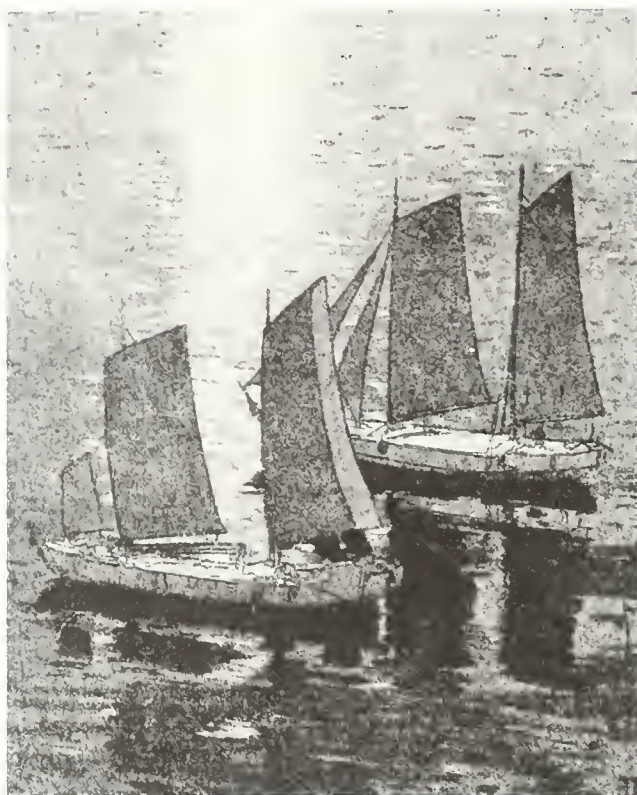
Ship: "We believe very strongly in the use of a Reader's Digest version. Right up front. No analysis, just the big picture. For the executive summary, our motto is, 'Tell me less of how it came to be and more of what it means to me.' We recognize that the report we have just spent three months on may get twenty minutes of attention, tops."

"How about report format?"

Seaweed: "We've always done our reports in the 8½" x 11" double-spaced format. It carried us through the 701 era just fine, and I see no need to change now. And because of its uniform appearance, we're able to plant our key findings at random points in the text, thereby requiring the decision-maker to read the whole report in order to get to its basic findings."

Ship: "We use the cluster development analogy for page layout. You know, groups of words in blocks of fairly dense type with plenty of open space between for visual relief. Key findings, recommendations and policies are often highlighted in extra wide page margins. If important points must occur within the text, we use bold type. We also repeat our major findings in the summary, of course."

"What about graphics?"



... a sound structure and clear purpose.

Seaweed: "Never use them. Graphics tend to break up the uniform appearance we try to achieve in our reports."

Ship: "We believe that a picture really is worth a thousand words. Sketches, maps, graphs, charts, and symbols make sense. After all, the planning profession is rooted in the design disciplines. We like to think about L'Enfant's plan for Washington. It's not his cogent written analysis that comes to mind, but rather his graphic vision of broad boulevards and expansive public spaces all in a grand radial design. Every time my people put their pens to the legal pad, they ask themselves, 'Could this be explained better graphically?' L'Enfant left a legacy and, in our small way, we hope to as well."

"What's your position on the use of photographs?"

Seaweed: "Professional photographers are way too expensive and pictures are awfully commonplace and self-evident. We like to keep our reports in the abstract, the theoretical, you know. A photograph or two might draw attention away from our critical research findings; worse yet, it might cause the decision-maker to just skim the report, perhaps missing a particularly strong statement. Then there's the hassle of possibly having to change our 8½" x 11" standard format... I could go on."

Ship: "Oh yes, we like photographs. My people always have a camera with them in the field. When we can't take pictures ourselves, we borrow them. Pictures of people doing what we are recommending. Candid action pictures of committee meetings, public hearings, neighborhood leaders, problem sites, you name it. The cost of film is a small expense compared to the benefits we get back. When our decision-makers get our report, we hope they will be able to see that the community involvement was real and that the benefits are tangible."

"What's your attitude on plan implementation?"

Seaweed: "It's not our job. If we had to get involved in implementing every plan we prepared, we would never get to the next plan, which could be even more important than the one we just finished. We assign follow up responsibilities to other departments. It's our way of letting the line people share in some of our success."

Ship: "We measure our success on how well the plan works as it is implemented. Conceptual and other general planning is an important first step, but we are not content to let our plans die on the vine. Our plans usually include a few practical examples; we call them the "show me how" element. This can mean the use of concrete examples to show how a particular policy can be implemented or it can mean a detailed planning report following immediately on the heels of the general plan. We see the two as inseparably linked."

Planning Director: "Thank you very much, gentlemen. That will be all for now."

(Section chiefs exit)

"I have just one last question for you, Mr. Planning Director... Where did you ever find the fellow to head up your Seaweed Section?"

Planning Director: "Oh, he used to be a writer for a major periodical. They had to let him go when his monotonous writing style fell beneath their standards."

"Which periodical?"

"The Federal Register." □

Glenn R. Harbeck is a planning consultant in the Wilmington, NC office of Edward D. Stone, Jr. and Associates, Planners and Landscape Architects. Harbeck is a 1978 graduate of the Department of City and Regional Planning, UNC-Chapel Hill, and a 1976 graduate of the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry, at Syracuse.