The Challenge of Land-Use Planning in Haywood County, or Real Planners Never Use Plan 'A'

Ginny Faust

Haywood County was one of 11 counties to receive funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission in the fall of 1991 as part of the Mountain Area Planning Program. The Division of Community Assistance of the North Carolina Department of Economic and Community Development administered the grant. The purpose of the grant was to allow counties to look at community growth issues and identify areas of concern that required action or needed further study, and then develop recommendations for addressing these issues. The grant outline specifically recognized that counties would be at different stages in planning and managing land uses, and a great deal of flexibility was built into the process to allow recipients to follow a program and prepare a report that best suited their needs.

In order to accomplish this task, the grant required that every county collect and analyze data on population, the economy and the natural and built environment; involve the community in identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as growth issues; develop recommendations; and then prepare a map that classified the county into general categories as outlined by the Division of Community Assistance. The grant proposal recommended a planning period of five to ten years for study. Grant money was to be spent within the year.

On the surface, this sounds like a typical planning exercise, where you plan the work and then work the plan. Involve the citizens and people will gain owner-

ship, ensuring that the plan will have a better chance of implementation. Public participation, where there are lots of opportunities for discussion, will help people become familiar with what you are doing, and in the end you will have a plan that provides a guideline for the future. Right?

Since I've asked the question, you have probably decided that something went wrong, and you are correct. Even though the outcome was totally contrary to what we had initially hoped for, we learned several valuable lessons. Perhaps if you are tackling a difficult project you may find our experience useful.

In the beginning was Plan A

In the beginning, things went just great. I had come to Haywood County in June of 1991 to be the County Planner, replacing a woman who was retiring after 14 years. The Planning Department was merged with the Economic Development Commission shortly before I was hired, and their director, Rick Webb, became the new head of the department. Rick was a tremendous asset because not only was he a county native and knew all the people to include in the planning process, but he also had lots of experience in strategic planning. Also new to Haywood County was Jack Horton, the first full-time professional manager; he started work in March of 1991, coming from nearby Macon County. The five Commissioners had all been elected the previous December.

Rick Webb planned several all-day retreats with the Commissioners and Manager, which were intended to be information sessions on important issues including solid waste, land use, infrastructure and capital-improvement planning. Our first retreat, in August, dealt with solid waste issues. We successfully used the format of “Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going? Where Do We Want To Be And How Are We Going To Get There?” By the end of the day, it seemed that we had

Ginny Faust grew up in Connecticut, went to school at Notre Dame and worked in Boston before she got her Master’s in Planning at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. She has since worked near Williamsburg, Virginia and for the City of Hendersonville, NC, before moving to Haywood County. When she’s not at meetings listening to irate citizens, she works on her Plan B career, writing a murder mystery.
a clear focus on how to approach several controversial areas of solid waste that faced the county in the future. My strong belief was reinforced that consensus does work, building ownership and teamwork.

This was exactly what we wrote about in our grant application, which we submitted in early October. We were invited to apply in September, so there wasn’t much time to prepare. We talked about community education, consensus and ownership. We proposed three sets of public input sessions: an initial forum to obtain a “vision” of what the County should be in the future; a second to complete the strength and weakness analysis, develop goals and objectives and identify priorities for action; and a final one to present the plan. We also talked about forming a Steering Committee, representing a broad background of people, skills and concerns.

We were notified in late October that we were one of the recipients. We used part of the money to hire an intern from the Master’s of Public Administration program at Western Carolina University, Bill Andrew, who worked part-time. We also used part of the money to hire a full-time assistant, Tom House, who had just graduated from the Bachelor’s program in planning from Appalachian State. Tom’s job was to help with the data collection and relieve me of some of my administrative responsibilities with the ordinances so I have more time to devote to the grant. Both of them were a tremendous asset through the process.

The solid waste session went so well that we decided to use the same format for our next workshop, on land-use planning issues. It was scheduled for Friday, December 13. Does this sound like the beginning of a problem? The session was intended to be an educational process for the Board of Commissioners to learn more about land-use planning. It also gave them the opportunity to identify potential issues that would most likely need to be addressed in the future. We hoped that this would speed the arrival at consensus, once we had heard from the community about their concerns.

Without a doubt, that day was the highlight of my nine year planning career. With the help of the staff of the Asheville office of the Division of Community Assistance, we were able to identify and prioritize issues in three categories: appearance, development and quality of living. Several members of the Planning Board attended, as well as a reporter from the local paper. Rick prepared an educational video entitled, “Our Land, Our Future” which outlined land-use planning issues in Haywood County. It was shown for the first time that day, and helped to set the tone for the discussion to follow.

Haywood County is said to be the most mountainous county east of the Mississippi; it falls almost one mile in elevation from the highest point to the lowest. With a population of approximately 47,000, it still has a strong rural feeling. Part of the Great Smoky Mountain Na-

![Champion International paper mill in Haywood County.](image)
partment of Commerce, co-chaired the project.

It was a big success because people came together. To demonstrate their commitment to the project, the state provided a planner for six months and economic development specialist for one year. A document was prepared that outlined many strategies for diversifying the economic base, strengthening existing industries, training workers and other approaches. The need for land-use planning came up in several of the committees, in the designation of industrial sites, increasing tourism and protecting the quality of life.

Even though Champion and Dayco did not close, the county has lost over 1,000 manufacturing jobs at its four major manufacturing facilities since 1988. The county has not attracted any new industry of significant size since the 1950’s. People are worried about the loss of high-paying industrial jobs. Many people seeking second homes in the mountains have chosen Haywood County as their place to live in the summer. The easily-developed land has already been taken, however, which means that roads and houses are being placed on slopes of 30, 40, and 50 percent.

Haywood County does not have zoning. It does have what is called a Pre-Development Ordinance, which regulates the subdivision of land through a check-list review process. No road design standards, minimum lot sizes or setbacks are required. There is a flood plain ordinance, and the county has a person on staff to administer the sediment control ordinance. However, in the opinion of the county staff, there are many gaps in these ordinances. A landslide occurred above the town of Maggie Valley because of blasting to widen a switchback in a steep road leading up to a subdivision. It is still visible miles away over a year later; the soil is so unstable it may never be able to support plants or trees, and the development of the subdivision has come to a halt. There is no junkyard or junk car ordinance, and the road leading to the county’s only ski resort is lined with rusting cars, buses and trucks. Billboards line the entrance into Maggie Valley.

These were the issues that were addressed in the worksession with the County Commissioners in December. I showed slides of some of these land-use concerns, as did Johanna Francis, the Erosion Control Specialist. We both went over gaps in regulations in our present ordinances. I briefly talked about the Land-Use Guidance System, a more flexible way of approaching zoning, which had been implemented in Bedford County, Virginia and at the time was being considered in Burke County, North Carolina (it is now in place—see page 34).

In the afternoon the commissioners went through an exercises of identifying their main concerns, and then prioritized them. There was great similarity among all five on what their concerns were. Once again, consensus had worked. I was thrilled, and couldn’t wait to get started on appointing the Steering Committee for the land-use grant after Christmas.

**Here comes Plan B**

The local newspaper printed a story about what happened at the worksession. In the article, the reporter said that at the end of the session, the board had “sketched an informal course toward zoning.” This was not what had been said at all, in my opinion, but I figured it didn’t matter that much and we did not try to correct the misstatement. But many people read that statement and were most concerned. Over the holidays county residents who did not want further land-use controls started communicating with each other.

In early January 1992, a group of residents opposing land-use controls asked that the commissioners meet with them at one of the county elementary schools in the Crabtree community to discuss the board’s increased attention to zoning issues. Because not all of the commissioners could attend, they decided not to go but scheduled another meeting a couple of weeks later. The citizens held their meeting anyway. The same reporter who had covered the worksession wrote an article about the Crabtree meeting, in which he said that the commissioners should have attended the meeting, even without one of their members. He also wrote that many people suspect the board has already made up its mind on zoning. He implied that the video we had prepared was “slick and packaged.”

The five commissioners, County Manager, Erosion Control Specialist and I attended the second meeting in Crabtree in late January. About 260 people attended,
and most of them used the opportunity to voice their opposition to any kind of planning whatsoever. We showed the same slides we had used at the worksession, outlining land-use concerns; we also showed slides showing the beauty and heritage of the county. We did not show the video. One of the slides I showed was of a fence that was supposed to screen a junkyard. It had some old metal sheeting loosely attached and part of it had come away. The previous County Planner had taken the slide; I was using it to illustrate the importance of good screening requirements. After my presentation, one of the speakers pointed out that the fence wasn’t there anymore and how could I in good conscience use an out-of-date slide?

The other speakers all gave their reasons why they were against land use planning and zoning, which in their minds meant the same thing. After the meeting, I was criticized for showing so many negative slides of Haywood County. I was not successful in convincing people that I was trying to demonstrate that there were areas that might need attention; instead I seemed to be an outsider trying to run down their home.

A core group of people opposed to land use planning organized themselves into the Haywood County Concerned Citizens Group. The Planning Board met with the County Commissioners in March to begin forming the Steering Committee as part of the next step of the land-use study. At their second joint meeting the Concerned Citizens came and demanded that the process be abandoned. It was only after a long, and at times acrimonious, debate that they agreed to participate—but only if they could appoint one-third of the members. They also asked that the name of the committee be changed from “steering” to “study” because, in the words of one of the members, when you say steering it implies you are going somewhere.

It took one more meeting, held on April 1, (are you beginning to see a pattern here?) for us to arrive at an agreement. In order to accommodate all the people who wanted to serve from the Concerned Citizens, as well as obtain the diversity in background and interests that we wanted, we ended up with 40 people on the Study Committee. We had our first meeting in late May; the study was due to end September 30. The size of the group made it awkward to have meetings where everyone could participate, but we tried our best by breaking into small groups.

What Happened to Goals and Objections?

After several meetings, the Committee did decide to go out into the community and hold a series of ten public input sessions where people could give their comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the county, identify community growth issues and vote on their top three priorities. Before these sessions started, as part of public education and in an attempt to show that planning did not necessarily mean zoning, I wrote an essay entitled “What is Planning?” [see sidebar] It was first distributed to the Committee members, and then appeared as an editorial in the local paper.

The ten sessions were held over an eight-week period, in all areas of the county. Many of the people who attended stated that they were opposed to land-use planning and zoning, although when we asked for specific instances of strengths, weaknesses and issues many pertinent concerns and ideas came out in the discussion. Some of these included whether a farmland preservation program was needed, the importance of clean water and whether it was better to have door-to-door garbage pick-up or to keep the scatter-site dumpsters and recycling areas called “convenience centers.” After all the meetings had been held, we typed up nine pages of issues mentioned by the Study Committee or at the meetings. When it was time for the Study Committee to get together and identify specific recommendations for the commissioners, however, the Concerned Citizens said that only one statement should be forwarded—“that the Study Committee has determined that the consensus of the people of Haywood County who attended the meetings is that people don’t want land-use planning or zoning.” That was the only motion that passed.

The study report has been presented, in draft form, to the County Manager for his review. Then it goes to the Study Committee members and to the State, where it may reside peacefully on a shelf for years to come. Or, perhaps, it may be trotted out at some future date, when a land-use conflict comes to Haywood County and people want to think about their options for action.

Ten Precepts for Planners

1. Figure out the context of a project before you get started. Have other things been happening that will affect how people will react to this one? Looking back, 1991 was not a good year for a land-use study in Haywood County, because two other land-use issues were already getting people excited—siting a new landfill, and dealing with the proposed watershed rules. Farmers were especially concerned that more regulations were going to drive them out of business; statements on our part that they would not be affected were not reassuring. Evidently, people have heard “I’m from the government and I’m here to help you” too many times.

2. Make sure that the local leadership is united to move forward on your project. Build consensus with your leaders with a clear game plan ahead of time. Keeping it may be trickier, however, especially if controversy is involved. After an initial period of consensus which had been achieved during their December worksession, the commissioners’ views on how to pursue land-use planning began to diverge.

3. When you are new to an area or job, don’t tackle a big project unless you are absolutely certain that the
What is Planning?
Planning is looking ahead, so communities can figure out where they want to be in the future and then decide how they are going to get there. In order to make planning work, a community should have a vision of what it wants to be. Another way to think of this would be to consider what people like and want to save and what needs to be changed.

For the people of Haywood County, that means first asking lots of questions and then making decisions. For instance, should there be more water and sewer service? If so, where? Are the roads adequate? Which ones should be widened? Should the western part of the county receive natural gas? Does the county want to recruit more industry? Where would be the best location for it? Should tourism be more strongly emphasized as part of the county's economy, and what impact would that have? Should the county make a conscious effort to preserve farmland, and how can this be accomplished? Does the county need recreation programs? What about bike trails and walking paths? Are there any special areas that deserve special consideration, like habitat for rare or endangered species? Are there any historic buildings or sites that should be protected? Does a community need a new school, or has an existing school gotten too old so that it needs to be shut down? Should the convenience centers [trash and recycling drop off locations] be continued if the county begins door-to-door pick-up of garbage? How will all of these issues affect property values?

The answers to these questions are not always obvious and often create controversy. In some cases, these questions lead to more questions. Sometimes, deciding not to have something is also planning. After all these questions are considered, people may decide that the protection of individual property rights is their most important consideration, and therefore no further regulations are wanted. The free market economy will control where development occurs as well as what kind—but the local, state and federal governments still make decisions that affect development, such as the location of new gas, water and sewer lines and new or widened roads. These infrastructure improvements have a tremendous impact on what happens. With the right roads and utilities, an established residential or farming community could become the number one choice for industry; property values may triple in a tax revaluation and families may decide to sell, or not be able to afford to stay.

What is the role of the planner in all this? It may be helpful to think of a planner as an architect who is helping a family design a house. The family will probably already know what they need, like how big it should be, how many bedrooms and bathrooms they want and whether they can afford a finished basement. They may also have a picture in their mind about what they want their house to look like. The architect then takes these ideas and comes up with alternative designs: one bedroom downstairs and two up, or all upstairs; the kitchen as a separate room or one connected to the dining room. The architect then presents these alternatives to the family, with the advantages of each design, and then they make the final decision. It is not the architect’s job to tell the family whether they want a porch off the back; the family must decide that. He may tell them it will cost so much extra, or that a porch in that location won’t work because it will block the sun in a certain room, however. It is the architect’s duty to help the family make an informed decision so that their needs are met.

Accordingly, it is the planner’s duty to help inform the citizens and commissioners about the natural and man-made assets of the county and what that might mean. If one mountain has unstable soils, the planner is charged with warning the county that continued development in that area may cause problems, and special precautions should be considered. New water and sewer lines in one valley could drive five productive farms out of business; located in another valley, it may not affect any. It is the job of the citizens and the commissioners to decide on goals and the policies to carry them out; then the planner informs the community what options there are to carry out these policies.

Another part of planning is anticipating what might occur in the future, and deciding what can be done now to take advantage of opportunities, or prevent problems from happening. We listen to the weather forecast so we know what clothes to wear, or if we need to bring an umbrella. That is planning ahead in the most basic sense. We are already going to build a new landfill and jail; are there other facilities that the county will need in the future? Where should they go? Should they have access to a major highway because they will cause a lot of traffic, or are they better suited to a remote area? How will we pay for them?

Some people may think that planning is the same as zoning. It is not. Zoning is only one of many tools to help communities control how land is developed, and it is not necessary at all for a community to use in order to plan. Adopting an ordinance that regulates junkyards or one that requires a soil study on certain slopes before blasting takes place is not zoning—it is planning. Deciding that some communities do not want water and sewer lines, for example, is also planning.

After debating the pros and cons of all the issues, if Haywood County decides to do nothing at all, then it would still have a plan. In ten or twenty years, people would not wonder how and why it developed the way it did—they would know. This land-use study grant is giving the citizens of Haywood County the opportunity to look around now and make some decisions about what they want the county to be and how they want to get there.
majority of people are behind it. I think this is especially true in the mountains, where "outsiders" are viewed with suspicion by many people, until they have proven themselves trustworthy. Perhaps I would have had more success presenting controversial ideas if I had had a couple of years under my belt as the county planner, and people already knew me.

If at all possible, pick a positive project first, where you can gain some trust and establish credibility. Try to make it something visible and concrete, as opposed to a new policy manual that only county employees will see. I am now beginning to work on naming all the roads in the county for Enhanced-911, which will include putting up road signs; later we will tackle addressing as well. Even though some people won't be happy that we have to re-name their road because it is a duplicate of a road elsewhere, most people have been enthusiastic about this, especially the Volunteer Fire Departments, who are well-respected members of their communities. After you have made a name for yourself as both a planner and a person, then you can think about moving towards something more controversial.

4. When involved in a controversial project, do your homework--out in the community--ahead of time. Do your best to create a constituency for your project. Try to line up prominent people (who may or may not be in the public eye) and obtain their support of the discussion at least, if not of the objective. We began a series of interviews in the spring, and discovered quiet support for the goals of land-use planning, even if people didn't call it that. By then it was really too late to help with the process.

5. Remember that in most cases the people opposed to something are the most highly motivated because they feel they have the most to lose. Before your project goes public, spend some time identifying the people who are likely to be involved and go talk with them. This also establishes a personal relationship and could help build your credibility. People may feel more kindly disposed to your views if you have made the effort to gain an understanding about their concerns and fears. Many times, they have valid reasons for feeling the way they do. If you can incorporate their concerns and ideas into your proposal from the very beginning, you may diffuse some of the opposition you face as well as gain respect as a person who doesn't think she has all the answers. The fewer negative issues you have to deal with, the more likely you are to get positive results.

6. Repeat after me: "The process is as important as the product." Share as much information as you can with everyone who is interested, even if you think it would be irrelevant or boring. I made the mistake of thinking that the grant guidelines we had received from the state and the application I wrote to receive funding might be confusing to people not used to planning terms. Towards the very end of the summer, I happened to mention the guidelines and ears perked right up. What was this? Can we see it? So I made copies of both documents and gave them to the few who asked for them; they were passed out among the Concerned Citizens and my last meeting had the added burden of assuring people that I was not trying to keep information from them. The personal relationships you establish with each project may do more to help you and the profession than any article that is written. People may not always remember a fact or something they've read, but they always remember you as a person. If you are fair and open, you will earn the respect of the community over time.

7. Make sure you have adequate time to do your job. We were hampered by the fact that we only had a year to do the data collection, hold the meetings, and then come up with recommendations. People asked us several times what the rush was, and they were not satisfied when I explained that it was because of the grant. I got the feeling that they thought I was trying to slip something past them in the hurry to finish. Most land-use studies take a couple of years at least, and since this was Haywood's first one in over 20 years, we needed more time to build trust and work towards consensus.

8. Make sure that all your facts and examples are completely accurate. People who don't want the project to succeed will seize on the slightest inconsistency to show that you are wrong. After I showed the old slide of the junkyard fence, on several occasions people used that to demonstrate that I didn't know Haywood County.

9. Find examples, nearby if possible, of instances where a similar project has been implemented and is now working. Planners especially need to be identifying places where land-use planning has created jobs, preserved the environment, protected neighborhoods and improved the quality of life. Saying it's a good thing isn't enough to win over your skeptics—they want evidence.

10. Maintain your sense of humor at all times! Remember--this crisis, too, shall pass. CP