

Cary's Response to Rapid Growth: Reflections Upon Twenty Years of Change

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In preparation for this issue on politics and planning, Carolina Planning issued a call for papers from practicing planners in North Carolina who hold or have held elective office. In response, Robert Hinshaw, economic development section chief in the state Division of Community Assistance and former member of the Cary Town Council and Cary Planning and Zoning Board, shares his insights in this article on the role of the planner in these positions.

What's the difference between a planner, a planning board member and a town council member? This could be the opening line of a party joke or riddle, but in my case all three characters are the same. I have had the opportunity in recent years to serve as a practicing planner, a member of a town planning board, and as an elected town council member. This article discusses some of my experiences and offers suggestions for those expecting to serve in any of these positions.

Planner--A Changing Role

After several years as a state-employed community planner with the Division of Community Assistance (now a part of the North Carolina Department of Economic and Community Development), I was transferred to the Raleigh area in 1972. My planning experience had previously been as a consultant to municipalities and counties that contracted with the state for planning or public administration services, usually for a period of up to two years. This was the "HUD 701" era, when much local planning was partially aided financially by federal funds sub-granted through the state for specific local government plans and activities. By the early 1970s numerous housing and other federal grant programs that directly related to planners and their work were being discussed in Congress. Many programs were folded into the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, initiating the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program which still lives today. This background sensitized me to the need to conduct local planning comprehensively, and to try to include in the process a broad spectrum of input from citizens as well as the land-owners and developers who ultimately "implement" much of a local development plan through their privately funded projects within the community.

Located between the state capitol and Research Triangle Park, Cary was beginning to experience astonishing residential growth. Building permits for new single-family housing were being issued at much higher rates than for most other municipalities the same size as Cary.

In the late 1960s, Cary had gained the reputation of a pleasant residential community for those who could afford the upper middle-class suburban lifestyle of that day. A contract with the city of Raleigh for water and sewerage enabled Cary to offer these services beyond the capacities of its own limited wells and treatment facilities. The town had extended water and sewer services to a large-lot subdivision that was developed within and around a major golf course. With tree-lined, curvilinear streets, free from overhead electric wires, it appeared that local developers and the town were attempting to construct subdivisions that meshed with the rolling hills of the existing landscape, rather than the "bulldoze and replant" practice that was common then. Other developers were executing their versions of "up-scale" units and new subdivisions were opening monthly.

Town officials viewed the growth positively and were taking steps to accommodate it; however, some existing residents expressed concern over the rapid pace of development. Anti-commercial and industrial sentiment was voiced, indicating the preference of many residents that Cary should retain its "bedroom" community character.

The town had a limited planning staff, but in 1971 had already adopted an abbreviated version of a land development plan. Although some of the review and meeting

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procedures were scarcely adequate, town officials made an effort to tap the resourcefulness of interested citizens, many of whom were connected with state or federal government, or were educators or other highly trained technical professionals. In less than a year from the time that I moved there, I was asked to serve on the Town Planning and Zoning Board.

The Committee of Citizens

Since the 1920s, planning advisory boards were authorized by enabling legislation in numerous states to advise local government, or even to convince the elected officials on planning matters. As a planning board member, I was now involved in a process that chooses which actions are best for the entire community, yet I soon realized that decisions tied to these recommendations can affect the everyday lives and investments of my neighbors. For example, land development plans appear very reasonable and neat when various uses are presented on a colored map; however, the dividing line between uses becomes very personal to the homeowner whose life savings is invested in a tract adjacent to land proposed for industrial rezoning. Such actions affect not only "what's on the other side of the fence" but can cause drastic changes in the pattern of activities in an entire quadrant of the community. As a planner by profession, I was particularly concerned that such issues be given fair and open hearings, and that citizens involved in development issues be made more aware of their rights and options with respect to the town's ordinances and planning process.

At this time, the elected officials did not have to be "sold" on the major benefits of planning; most of them were willing to take what help they could get. Most of Cary's growth during the 1970s was residential with little business or industrial development taking place. The heavily outnumbered "Old Cary" residents were concerned with the effects of rapid growth, yet the new residents were concerned with virtually the same things: the visual clutter, traffic congestion, poor land-use combinations, and poor development practices. Their sentiment was later coined the "last-one-in syndrome", when relatively new residents voice some of the same concerns that everyone contributes to; in effect, urging that we "close the town's doors" now that they are inside.

There was much to be addressed and learned as a planning board member in such a growth situation. As an experienced planner, I had been more involved with small towns in which rejuvenation or "growing old gracefully"

was the order of the day rather than dealing with rapid growth. Were there newsolutions to old problems? Did the "new town" concepts on display in the early 1970s, such as Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland, hold promise for Cary? Many new residents and some developers were aware of such innovations and began to voice their interest to town officials. Citizens wanted fewer driveway cuts, less strip development and less of the associated ugliness and traffic problems they had seen occur elsewhere. Land developers began to look for ways to do group or advance multi-use zoning of large tracts, hoping to lessen the problems in obtaining commercial rezoning after a residential subdivision was in place nearby. By 1974, with the help of a committee of planners, developers and builders, the town developed one of the first functioning planned unit development (PUD) ordinances in the state.

Planned Unit Developments

The initial work on the ordinance was begun primarily at the request of the developer of a 1000-acre tract of land who wanted the flexibility to reduce setbacks and street rights-of-way. He wanted to provide PUD features such as resi-

dential units grouped around cul-de-sacs with internal commercial facilities and large blocks of open space. The PUD ordinance was adopted about fifteen years ago, and still functions reasonably well with only relatively minor changes.

In this climate of heavy growth pressure, other land regulatory tools were developed. These included subdivision regulations requiring the dedication of recreation and open space lands, and the additions of an Industrial Performance District (IPD) and a Reservoir Water-

shed Protection District (RWPD) to the zoning ordinance.

Land Dedication

In the early 1970s, large tracts of land were being cleared for houses. Under the authority granted by the North Carolina General Statutes, the town adopted and has rigorously enforced the requirement of land dedication to the public according to the number of residential units built. This requirement has enabled the town to assemble land for a major park, several smaller parks, and land for a greenway and trail system that is gradually expanding with each year's new budget authorization.

Industrial Performance District

The Industrial Performance District (IPD) originated



Minimal setbacks and small lots in Cary's Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) are offset by rear service drives and open space areas.

when town council members in 1978 grew concerned that a tax base of primarily residential property would likely result in higher taxes for homeowners. While some citizens preferred a "residential only" community, town staff and the council began to see that this was not a sound fiscal policy. They saw a revision to the industrial zoning in the form of a floating district as a way to provide more potential industrial land. The IPD establishes rigid buffer requirements around an industrial site that directly relate to the intensity of use on the site. The IPD has provided additional industrial land options in locations that would otherwise have been strongly opposed by nearby residents or other businesses. The council also formally adopted a policy stating the town's intent to encourage a tax base composed of 40 percent residential and 60 percent nonresidential. This publicly informs the community, town staff and state industrial developers that this policy is an economic development goal.

Regional Water Quality

Regional water quality planning and neighborhood concerns for streams gave rise to the adoption of the Reservoir Watershed Protection District regulations. As a member of the Region J Council of Governments multi-county planning organization, town staff and officials have participated for years in federally and state funded water quality planning coordinated by regional staff. Region J made recommendations to its member units that they adopt local regulations aimed at protecting and improving water resources in the six-county area. These recommendations, coupled with citizen concerns about sediment and potential run-off pollution from development activities, led Cary to adopt and update requirements that deal specifically with impervious area limitations, stream buffers and street construction in designated watersheds.

Credit for such regulatory tools and their implementation can be attributed to the town's political climate over the years. This has included a young, open-minded planning staff, developers who were willing to be innovative, concerned and informed citizens, many of whom are expert in their own right as a result of education and employment, and town councils that were willing to listen to all of the participants.

Homeowner Organizations

Related to this political climate is the extensive use of the PUD, characterized by the organization of homeowner asso-

ciations which were initially founded to provide for the perpetual care of common lands, amenities and private streets. As a result, Cary is one of the most organized communities in the state or possibly in the southeastern United States. The ordinance requirements have virtually assured that the residents are organized, providing a unified voice that can be rallied whether dealing with the developer or with the town council on an issue related to a particular PUD. Such organization has spread to some older, conventional subdivisions which have formed similar homeowner groups in recent years.

During this period, the Cary Planning and Zoning Board set a high standard in promoting an open forum for citizen input in the town's planning process. For many years the town council has held public hearings for rezoning requests and other planning items jointly with the Planning and Zoning Board. Such items are then considered at the next regular planning board meeting, then reported back to the council for final action at one of its twice monthly meetings. This thirty-day cycle in the process makes citizen input possible.

Elected Officialdom

After nine years on the Planning and Zoning Board, I was elected to the Cary Town Council in 1981. The town faced several physical planning issues: expanding water and sewer facilities, improving growth management processes, updating the land development plan, addressing traffic and thoroughfare concerns, and improving the town's budgeting process. The role of the elected body is more far-reaching than that of either planner or planning board member. Certainly with planning issues, the practicing planner has the advantage. However, there are more issues and fronts in the role as a policymaker. The generalist planner has some advantages here, since by training and experience the planner must have some knowledge about government related issues and actors in the everyday world.

For example, the planner is familiar with information, numbers, maps and the jargon that are presented by staff or at town meetings. Similarly, zoning ordinances, meeting procedures and other facets of local government operations will not be as new to planners as to the layperson. Yet the local businessperson or homeowner who serves on the town board may overcome a lack of technical knowledge with their familiarity with the community and its residents. They can be effective in communicating with local residents or a visiting presenter to the council.



Site plan and landscaping requirements in Cary require street trees and adequate screening, as shown around this convenience store-gasoline station.

But I have found differences between the long-term view of the planner and the shorter term view that must be addressed by the elected official. These differences are both public and internal to the town's operation. The successful elected official will include both the long-term and the short-term views in his or her portfolio of concerns and activities.

In general, the elected official hears more from the citizen who is troubled with the anticipated impact of a rezoning action or ordinance revision than from the planner or the planning board member. Often, a project will already be under construction and the citizen is concerned, or a rezoning procedure has nearly run its course and the citizen sees the council member as a last resort to get the action that is favorable to the citizen's point of view. Developers and builders are also more likely to write or call members of the council as their proposals are processed (although this form of the local political process is probably involving planning board members more, particularly in several development "hot spots" across North Carolina). The council member may simply listen to the citizen's concerns or encourage better communications among conflicting parties. It is not unusual for such inquiries to lead to meetings between developer representatives and resident groups who are willing to try to reach an agreeable solution. One instance involved a proposal for a shopping center expansion into land zoned for office uses that was adjacent to single-family residences. Using a conditional zoning process available in the town's ordinance, meetings between the center owner and the residents resulted in the solution that the owner build an earth berm with landscaping and a wooden fence to permanently separate the conflicting uses.

Internal Policy Development

In reference to the actual goals and policymaking items for the town, the elected member can have a direct role, and in my view, has a direct responsibility to the community. The planner has a role in this process also, but it will usually be more in the form of recommendations, stopping short of having a final voice in such matters.

As an example of this internal policy development, the budgeting process for the town during earlier years was largely based on an assigned percentage increase given by the manager's office to department heads. The department heads then proposed their respective budgets to the manager, who in turn fine-tuned the budget allotment based on the best estimates for revenues from the tax base along with any tax increase that the mayor and council would approve.



Cary's Watershed Protection Ordinance has promoted lakes and structural measures which often become permanent amenities.

While this process is not unusual, there was not really a conscious goal-setting process by the council or key staff as to where the community should be headed and what should be accomplished in the future. As an elected official, I was able to argue for and obtain agreement by the council that this procedure should be improved. More recently, the council and key staff leaders have goal-setting sessions early in the year, after which department heads and the manager then develop budget proposals which are guided by the established

goals. Standing committees and the full council have an opportunity to fully review final proposals prior to adopting the budget and related program of work for the coming year. This process has won awards for several years in national competition.

Suggestions

To Planners

Continue to serve as the generalist in a world of specialists. Be the long-term "eyes and ears" for the places you serve. Assume the role of the visionary, continuing to remind the planning board, the council and the public of the long-range plan, its need to be periodically updated and how it should reflect the actions of today. Be willing to add innovative tools, yet limit the mystique and jargon when presenting information to the public, the planning board, and elected officials. Listen for changes that may need to be made in policies--from citizens, other staff members, elected officials, developers and builders. These participants may have good suggestions for implementation at any time. Do not put off their use until next year, when you might like to believe there will be more time or money to prepare an ordinance revision or a position paper. Finally, do not try to guess what the elected or management officials really want in reviewing projects. Ask for their current and long-range goals (if goals are not well-defined, offer to assist in their development).

To Planning Board Members

The basic citizen role is still a good one; think of how the proposed activity will affect you or your neighbors. Listen to the professionals, but make your own assessment; planning is often "common sense." Think of other examples in your community or in other places such as those being proposed--common mistakes can be prevented. Finally, let the elected officials know of your specific concerns with a



Cary's greenway system, constructed on land dedicated by private development, now contains more than seven miles of public trails.

project or the process. Changes can be made for the good of the whole.

To Elected Officials

Be objective and willing to listen to the staff, the advisory boards, and the public; there may be times when you are the only strength for a weak-voiced citizen. Be consistent in the exercise of planning matters. Addressing items differently from one site to another will often come back to haunt you. Set high standards for your community, your staff and yourself. In particular, let your staff and advisory boards know the standards and goals you seek, and give them room to attain these goals through the budget process, ordinances and other tools available to local government. ■

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tages for all affected land uses. Only a thorough knowledge and understanding of the evolving city can provide adequate solutions to complex problems of suitability.

Often the issue of suitability is more accurately assessed and solved by the inclusion of multiple players, each having an important goal to satisfy. When cities, counties and private individuals combine forces, positive and unexpected solutions may emerge.

An opportunity for cooperation is illustrated by the problem counties encounter in finding suitable school sites. Established residential areas dislike neighboring schools because they generate traffic. Cities face similar difficulties providing parkland and recreational facilities, and both the public and private sector experience problems finding sites suitable for affordable multifamily housing with adequate transportation access to schools and recreational services. A joint venture approach to shared land, facilities and planning could result in greater economy and improved functional facilities for everyone.

Because of economies of scale, planning for larger multi-use ventures can often more easily address issues of suitability. Relatively benign and passive areas buffer intensity and provide flexibility and appropriate transitions between surrounding uses. Infrastructure and transportation issues can be more adequately addressed on the larger scale than is possible within the restrictions of separated and uncoordinated smaller parcels.

Planning Can Effectively Manage Problems of Design and Growth

It is unfortunate that some would cast the regulatory power of government in a solely negative light. It is true that regulation can be misused, and punitively restrictive, shortsighted and misguided. But it is also true that land use and design-related regulations formulated in an environment of civic consensus, awareness of context, and commit-

ment to suitability can offer clear guidance for creative architects and developers in producing economically successful projects enthusiastically accepted by the community. Several emerging regulatory approaches, including impact fees and overlay districts, are being introduced in the Triangle area.

Judiciously applied, overlay ordinances can encourage and direct positive change and desirable development, as well as preserve existing features of an area. For example, in Raleigh, development of a Neighborhood Conservation Ordinance Overlay was a long and hard-fought process. After a series of infill battles had been brought before the city council, it became apparent that issues of context, suitability, appropriateness and transition were outside the realm of existing zoning. The overlay was developed to provide an organizational vehicle for consensus-building in preparation for infill development in older, largely developed, stable neighborhoods. At issue was the maintenance of neighborhood appearance, scale, character and general quality of life. Although the ordinance was resisted by land owners and developers--seeking to maximize their future development options--the ordinance was an effort to promote compatible development in ways that would benefit the entire community. Currently, the ordinance is being tested by application to its first neighborhood by request of the residents. The consensus of individuals from the broadest possible backgrounds with a mutually beneficial community vision is the key to the success of the overlay district ordinances.

All players participating in the planning process should understand that regulation built on consensus serves the greatest public good. Regulations are systems created out of human need and the expertise at a particular moment in time. As life changes, so should our regulations. Only by continual vigilant response to public consensus, contextual influences and suitability can designers and public officials successfully create livable cities. ■