

# Portrait Of A County Planner

*Wake County Planning Director John Scott, recipient of the North Carolina American Planning Association 1984 Outstanding Professional Achievement Award, retired on March 30, 1984. The following interview was granted in February.*

Late winter sunlight streams through the windows of John Scott's office and illuminates an enormous collection of memorabilia. Studies, maps, correspondence and volumes rest on shelves, bulge from filing cabinets, or hang on the courthouse walls.

The tall gentleman rises to greet me, his stern face breaking into a smile, his penetrating blue eyes aglow with youthful vigor. I am here to interview the Wake County Planning Director and to say good-bye to a retiring friend. Sunlight shimmers through his silver-white hair, as in a baritone southern drawl, John Scott describes his planning career.

The retiring planning director is a delightful mixture of southern gentility and intellectual prowess. Born in Mississippi and raised in Alabama, he spent World War II overseas as a Marine before returning to the South for college at the age of twenty-five. He received his B.S. from Auburn University and his M.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



In the late fifties, Scott moved to Raleigh, where as chief planning analyst for the original staff of the North Carolina Division of Community Planning, he embarked upon a lifetime career in local land use planning. Two years later, Scott went to work for the Research Triangle Park Regional Planning Commission where he provided technical assistance to Wake County for twelve years.

Scott recalls, "The Regional Planning Commission was created because some people were aware of the fact that the Research Triangle

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Park had enormous potential, but that its success would depend in a large part upon the physical, social and economic environment in the immediate three-county region. It was recognized that we might very well turn into a burgeoning metropolitan area, and of course, that has come to pass."

By 1972, Wake County had grown enough to prompt the County Commissioners to establish a planning department with John Scott as director. Scott candidly observes, "I must say that I think the Commissioners did it pretty much as a token response to what they recognized as the desire of a segment of the population; and to that extent, the Planning Department was in the nature of a window dressing. They could then say, 'See, we have a planning department. Stop fussing about planning.'"

It may have been window dressing to the County Commissioners, but to Scott it was a serious undertaking. A man of strong personal principles, he quickly established a reputation for honest tenacity. He retains that reputation today: "I don't think my personal priorities have changed very much. When I went to work for the county back in 1960, my priorities were to try to help county officials understand the planning process, to learn how to use it, to learn to respect it, and to be serious about it; and to try to persuade them to govern by law

*Laura Webb Margeson, a Wake County Planner from 1980 to 1982, is a free-lance writer in Raleigh, North Carolina.*

insofar as land use regulations were concerned, rather than practice government by the whims of individuals. My objectives were to help produce a workable and acceptable comprehensive plan."



*Fayetteville Street Mall in downtown Raleigh*

John Scott never strayed from his original objectives. In 1981, his department proposed a detailed plan for county land use. However, his plan was rejected in favor of a more lenient, general plan which has been described as a "vague document with few teeth" (Raleigh News and Observer, February 6, 1984 editorial). While the adopted plan is neither comprehensive nor restrictive, it does provide a general guideline for county growth, something that Scott has been advocating for over two decades.

#### Wake County's Land Use History

In his tenure with Wake County, John Scott has witnessed many changes in land use which he perceives as "basically the same as we may observe in most other metropolitan counties in the United States." Suburbanization began in the early sixties with what Scott calls "Phase One." At the beginning of this phase, downtown Raleigh was still a thriving shopping center. Gradual development of suburban shopping malls and construction of the city's beltline changed the character of the downtown area from retail trade to heavy commercial.

"Phase Two began in the late sixties with exurban sprawl -- the shotgun pattern of growth, people trying to flee even from the suburbs and into the hinterlands in an effort to find elbowroom, or affordable housing, or a place for a mobile home." Not surprisingly, this phase was characterized by a decrease in farming activities.

How did county government respond to these changes? "Changes occurred more in policy than in practice. Back in the early sixties there was no planning, per se, in Wake County. The only comprehension of planning that the Commis-

sioners had was that planning was the same thing as zoning."

Zoning of the county began in 1960 and (with the exception of rezoning cases) was completed in 1976, often over what Scott refers to as the "yowls and howls of protests" of citizens. The first controls were imposed in the Kit Creek area of the county, near the Research Triangle Park, by "extremely reluctant" County Commissioners who were "politically convinced" by park and state officials "that the Research Triangle Park was really going to be extraordinary and that they should have, therefore, some planning." In Scott's eyes no real planning occurred. "They didn't give any consideration to how that area might develop without public water supplies, no sewer systems, Triassic Basin soils [generally unsuitable for septic tank use] and all that."

"It was a very simple zoning map. Everything was zoned as it was -- if there was a store there it was zoned General Business; if there was a factory, it was zoned Industrial. Everything else was zoned Residential 20 [20,000 feet square per unit] because that was the minimum lot size required by the Health Department for the installation of a well and septic tank."

Using a text which Scott describes as "pretty much a copy of the old Durham County ordinance," the Commissioners gradually zoned the rest of the county. There was "strong citizen

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opposition" reflecting what Scott calls the "territorial imperative -- a strong, almost fanatical belief that a person should be able to do with his property whatever he pleases."

Says Scott, "No matter how we tried to explain the process they'd always answer, 'In other words, this is just something you're going to cram down our throats,' or 'This is communistic,' or 'This is creeping socialism' (although I don't think they had any idea what socialism is, or how ownership of agents of production by the State has much to do with land use)."

There were exceptions to the public's generally negative reaction to zoning. For example, the Falls Basin was zoned "with some persuasion that it was a good thing to do because, even then, the Falls Lake was a gleam in the community's eyes." In addition, "a very small area was zoned around Macedonia because the citizens there requested it. They were seeing the effects of suburbanization and wanted some 'protection.'"



Scott adds, "All of this was done without any comprehensive plan. The outlook was 'We will adapt to change of circumstances by reaction to zoning petitions.' The goals and objectives were poorly stated then; they're poorly stated now."

During his tenure, Scott has witnessed "significant changes" in public attitudes. However, "there's still a hard core of that kind of [territorial imperative] belief; in fact one of our County Commissioners still clings to it strongly. But it's not nearly as strong as it was. Many who protested violently at that time [mid-seventies] have come around and said, 'Now that it's in effect, we can see that it's a pretty good thing.'" He smiles and adds, "Of course, everybody complains about having to get a permit to do something."

A notable change in citizen input occurred in the early seventies with the emergence of citizen action groups. Scott observes that many of those groups were supportive of planning efforts because "it appeared to them logical that a growing metropolitan area should do some planning."

#### Highlights of a Planning Career

What does John Scott see as his major accomplishments as Wake County's planning director? "It was an accomplishment to build up a staff of eleven people over a period of about five years; to even survive as a department. It took eleven and one-half years, really, to get a foot in the door and to become accepted as a bona fide county government department."



*Rural Wake County*

Although he refuses to take personal credit for the accomplishments of his department, Scott admits that applying "relentless pressure" the Planning Department has helped improve the coun-

ty's planning procedures. "We now have a Board of Adjustment, for example, that has a rather good understanding of what its powers and duties are, and I don't think members are nearly as arbitrary as they used to be. Somewhat of the same thing can be said about the Planning Board. Back in the early sixties, no one would believe what he or she heard at some of the Planning Board meetings."

During Scott's tenure, the composition of the Planning Board was changed from a seven-member, "strictly pro-development" board to a ten-member board "with more diversification

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among the members." Admits Scott, "Maybe I had something to do with that. I know I suggested it."

John Scott is justifiably proud of his department. "We have provided an awful lot of non-zoning services that the public is not generally aware of, that I think have strengthened county government in many ways."

Under Scott's leadership, the Planning Department has produced a diverse array of projects, including a feasibility study for creating a foreign trade zone adjacent to the Raleigh-Durham Airport, a detailed grouping of county soils according to their suitability for urban uses, a street-naming project to eliminate duplicate street names throughout the county, and a county-wide orthophotographic mapping project.

As a result of such projects and because of the diversity of its staff, the Planning Department frequently serves as a public information bureau: dispensing information about county soils, statistics, land use history and public facilities; and providing maps and zoning ordinances to interested citizens and officials.

During his tenure with Wake County, John Scott has introduced county officials and the public to a multitude of innovative planning concepts. For example, the county's Airport and Highway Districts were developed from his proposals. The use of Standard Industrial Classification Manual codes in some of the county's zoning regulations was another of Scott's ideas.

Some of Scott's suggestions, such as performance zoning, have not been well-received. However, through Scott's efforts, county officials and the general public have been educated about the potential for innovative planning, and such knowledge may lead to adoption of less traditional approaches in the future.

How does Scott feel about leaving the Wake County Planning Department to an unknown successor? "I do feel I think a perfectly natural, deep sense of proprietorship about this department, and a little jealousy and a little pride. However, I have some sort of fuzzy theory that a

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'changing of the guard' will frequently act as a catalyst and crystalize ideas or projects that the preceding planning director could not. Part of it is that when a new planning director comes on board, he automatically gets everyone's attention."

### Frustrations and Conflicts

Scott's job hasn't always been easy, but he believes that every profession has its frustrations. "I don't want to sound like I have a special crying towel or that I am having some sort of professional temper tantrum. I think all planning directors share pretty much the same set of problems and opportunities. [However], it seems to me that our society believes that the least appropriate place for serious planning is in local government. In my opinion, the fundamental problems with planning in local government are:

1. Planning is something of a mystery
2. There's little agreement about what it is or how it's supposed to work
3. It's fuzzily regarded as a product instead of a process
4. Elected officials are reluctant to commit themselves to long-term plans

"Planning seems to be a respectable and necessary activity in almost everyplace except local government, particularly at the county level. Things have come a long way in twenty years. Municipal and large metropolitan planning departments have sprung up like crazy all over the state. But in some instances those departments represent more form than substance."

"County Commissioners seem to have a difficult time realizing that in a county that's growing this fast, the rural areas are becoming less and less rural, more and more urban; and that the functions of county government are being forced to change in response to metropolitan pressures. There is some foot-dragging in that respect."

Scott's biggest personal frustration is what he calls the "muzzle" or "gag". Says Scott, "There is no forum in which I may debate the

issues with the Planning Board or the citizens or the County Commissioners. I have to sit quietly and say nothing when I think that grave mistakes are being made. I've been told informally, although I can't produce a memorandum that says so, that the rule is, 'Thou shalt not debate the issues.' One wonders, then, why I am on the staff."

"It's excruciatingly frustrating to have to work under conditions where the rule is 'The planning director may not enter into fair debate,' and by fair debate I mean a gentlemanly or ladylike expression of opinions, views, or results of research. I think that's ridiculous. Why should the people of Wake County, through their tax monies, pay to have a planning department, but then say, 'Your knowledge, experiences, studies, and research are not worth being heard'? And that is the main reason I am retiring two years early!"



### Visions of the Future

Scott predicts, "There will be no really vast improvement in the planning process throughout North Carolina until the General Assembly is willing to see to it that there is. I think much of the enabling legislation needs to be thoroughly reviewed and overhauled."

First on Scott's list of needed overhauls is a clear definition of the comprehensive plan. "It doesn't have to be a cram-it-down-your-throat mandate, but it should be legislation that says something like, 'A comprehensive plan shall consist minimally of the following studies and documents and resolutions.'"

In addition, Scott would like to see improvements in legislation for extraterritorial jurisdictions (ETJs). For example, he thinks that the one/two/three mile ETJ delineation is "much too arbitrary and capricious" and should be "restructured to make it clear that the ETJ is a planning area."

*Continued on page 39*



## In The Works, *Continued from page 5*

The aesthetics component will test several hypotheses relating to the residents' and visitors' cognitive perceptions of development on Hatteras Island. A recently-distributed survey was prepared in an effort to measure respondents' tolerance for density. Preferences for development types were determined through a comparison of photos and drawings of community designs. The hypotheses will be supported, qualified, or rejected by a regression analysis. This analysis of regional carrying capacity will, theoretically, have strong credibility in the community as a function of the islanders' participation.

Recreation demand is included in the study due to the National Park Service's ownership interest (63 percent) in the island. The recreation use threshold is important in order to protect the physical environment and to ensure visitor enjoyment of the area. This section of the study will involve visitor attitude surveys, assessed management objectives of the Park Service, and environmental impacts of recreation on the island's ecosystem.

Physical systems will also be studied in this carrying capacity project. Land availability measures will provide an estimate for build-out ceilings for Hatteras Island. The development floor will assume single-family construction throughout the area while the ceiling measures multi-family and condominium development. A mid-range estimate of capacity will assume a mix of both single and multi-family units. Water supply capacity will be examined relative to existing supplies and service needs. In order to protect the current water supplies, a moratorium has been placed on new subdivision approvals until the existing water system is expanded. Wastewater treatment capacity will be assessed relative to island soil conditions and septic tank allowances.

The implications of a carrying capacity study are radically different than those of classroom-oriented projects; most notably, the complexity of threshold analysis requires a thorough review of very technical environmental and social conditions associated with the Hatteras community. For the students, the exercise has been an important practicum. It has forced the development of a reasonable and manageable guidance system for a community of particularly delicate proportions.

The findings from each group will be reported to Dare County officials this summer. Copies of the Currituck or Hatteras Island Carrying Capacity reports can be obtained by contacting the Center for Urban and Regional Studies, Hickerson House 067A, UNC-CH, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514.

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Second, Scott believes that planning boards should consist of anyone with an interest in planning. "Everyone should have access to the Planning Board, to sit on it and to listen and to vote. Citizen input in county government is too dadgum narrow."

Third, Scott sees a need for improvements in orientation procedures for county board members. He feels that Planning Board members should be sworn in (as are Board of Adjustment members)

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and that members of the Board of Adjustment and the Planning Board should receive training about relevant laws, powers and duties. He adds in the case of Planning Board members, "Actually, they have no powers."

In addition, "The County Commissioners should prepare a written charge to the Planning Board, outlining specifically what its duties are. It's incredible -- they have never had that."

Fourth, "The public has a right to know what its professional staff people think. Staff should be given the opportunity to express their views briefly, concisely and with proper deportment."

Finally, "More than anything else," says Scott, "I would like to see the general public recognize that planning is a managerial process and that plans and ordinances and regulations can be modified and changed as times change, but that they must be changed by following proper procedures." Pasted to the inside of the cover of Scott's copy of the county zoning ordinance is a quotation by U.S. Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter: "The history of liberty has largely been the history of the observance of procedural safeguards."

Scott observes with characteristic candor, "And you and I both know that rezoning procedures are for the birds, and a distinct species of birds at that -- buzzards!"

### Retirement Plans

After leaving his post with Wake County, Scott plans to immerse himself in home-improvement projects and to "listen for the voice of God to tell me if there is something else He wants me to do to be useful in this world." With his usual dry wit he adds, "If it is not made known to me, I will assume that from thenceforth I may do as I damn well please!" ☹