

Towards a Sustainable Seattle: Good Planning and Good Politics

J. Gary Lawrence

The City of Seattle is trying to shape a future which is more sustainable on a variety of measures. We want to sustain our environmental quality for both health and soul. We want to sustain our economic prosperity and maybe even obtain more clarity about the differences between standard of living and quality of life. And, we want to sustain our society--preserve what is best about us and maintain civility.

City officials have done a number of things toward this end. We have spent millions of dollars on water and air quality improvements. We have invested heavily in education. Significant portions of our tax dollars go into social programs designed to help people help themselves. We have recycling programs that are the envy of the nation. We have focused on remedying the problems we create. And yet, most of these things have been done without community agreement about what ought to be Seattle's preferred future.

When the Planning Department began doing our required Comprehensive Plan in 1990, we thought we could get to agreement about a preferred future by means of "normal planning stuff." Sustainability has, after all, many technical attributes. If we could just describe the problems clearly enough, we thought, logic would prevail and people would be willing to sacrifice self-interest for the public interest. However, as we engaged in this effort, it became clear that for

Seattle, at least, sustainability is not so much a problem of knowledge or skill or resources as it is a problem of wisdom and political will.

Therefore, we rethought the problem and started to focus on values and aspirations, hopes and fears, and all sorts of messy human stuff, rather than the more logical and safer technical planning activities. Through a major public involvement effort, we came to have a much better understanding of who we are in Seattle and what might make us happy. We then used this information to define a vision of what Seattle's future could be. The Planning Department brought forward strategies based on that vision that tried to resolve some of our conflicting values. The community has largely accepted the vision.

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) also altered the discretion and decision-making powers of local governments (including special districts) in Washington State. Under GMA, the City is required to adopt capital facility plans which are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. Further, no other City expenditures can be inconsistent with the City's adopted plan. Policies adopted by the City are no longer advisory or statements of legislative intent; they create legal obligations enforceable through the courts. Once adopted, the plans can only be amended once per year and amendments are subject to the same internal and external consistency tests.

The requirements of GMA were significant, but not exclusive, in shaping the City of Seattle's development of its Comprehensive Plan. In deciding upon a scope of work and resource commitment, Seattle's Mayor and City Council decided that the State's requirements, while difficult, would not prepare us to address the full range of problems we now face or can forecast as likely in the future. We decided to treat the required

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elements of this physical plan not as ends in themselves, as we traditionally have done, but, instead, to focus them as means toward broader societal goals. We set out to use the elements of our physical plans, in combination with other initiatives, to move us away from an undesirable but probable future, including spiraling growth, unchecked suburban sprawl, loss of open space, and traffic congestion. Instead, we are moving toward a preferred future for the City and the region. Our challenge was to get agreement on a preferred future and then focus the various elements of the plan toward that end.

Taking the Lead

The City's Mayor, Norman B. Rice, instructed the Seattle Planning Department to be the lead agency in developing the City's plan. In doing so, he gave us broad powers to coordinate the planning activities of other departments within the City. He described the process of developing a Comprehensive Plan as "a moral campaign for the future of our City." His definition of a successful planning effort was very concise and very challenging. The performance of the Planning Department, he said, would be judged on our ability to "make good planning into good politics."

We started by thinking about what makes good planning. Previous Seattle planning efforts, many of which have been ignored or were irrelevant when completed, have taught us some valuable lessons about planning in Seattle. The most important of those lessons seem to be:

- (1) It is very difficult to try to answer the questions "what ought we do" and "how ought we do it" at the same time;
- (2) To actually solve problems you must not just react to people's behaviors but, instead, you must understand the values and beliefs that are the basis for the behaviors;
- (3) It is not particularly useful to propose solutions to problems that others do not believe need to be solved; and
- (4) Having "experts" involved can be a very mixed blessing.

The Strategy

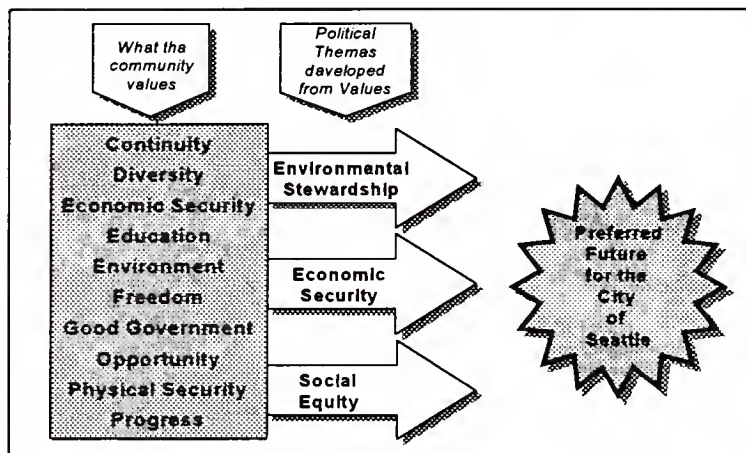
Taking these lessons to heart, we divided development of our comprehensive plan into three components with a strong emphasis on engaging a broad community spectrum in the dialogue. The first component, started in 1991, consisted of the Planning Department staff setting out to learn what Seattle's citizens valued

about their communities and what they considered the most important issues in preserving their quality of life. The next step was for city officials and staff, with public input, to develop a vision of a preferred future for the City; the vision was designed to solve the community-identified problems in a manner that would be consistent with their values. The final step was the development of specific implementation strategies, which include evaluation tools to ensure the community is moving toward the preferred vision and provide benchmarks by which Seattle's citizens can measure our collective progress.

The first step, value identification, was accomplished through the most extensive public involvement process the City had ever undertaken. In addition to the traditional steering committees and community meetings, we made extensive use of focus groups, radio, TV, direct mail, telephone surveys, newspapers, and other forms of outreach to try to engage those people who do not traditionally involve themselves in planning. In past planning efforts, we have had little difficulty in reaching that small group of "professional citizens" who seem to be involved in everything. We have, however, struggled to reach representatives of minority communities, the young, single parents, renters, and the poor. Therefore, we undertook special efforts to gain participation of these groups, including the translation of our documents into seven different languages (87 different languages or dialects are spoken in the Seattle Public School system) and recruitment of community representatives to work within individual communities. We went so far as to hire high school students to do outreach within the schools as well as to translate the plan into "teen speak."

It is important to note that the values expressed by Seattle's various communities confirmed some things we thought we knew but also opened our minds to some surprises. For example, city officials knew that within our community "environmental stewardship" was highly valued. We were surprised, however, at the extent to which the environment showed up more like a religious value rather than as an attribute of community. Among the Native American groups indigenous to the Pacific Northwestern area of the U.S., the environment was referred to as a "thou" rather than an "it." It is much like that for the existing population. Attacks on the environment are perceived to be the same as attacks on the person rather than something that is disassociated with the self.

We were also surprised at the extent to which the community feels that the "American Dream" has been betrayed and how much our community wants issues of "economic security" addressed. Most of us have



Values expressed by Seattle citizens.

been raised to believe that anything is possible for us, if we just decide to do it. We believe that resource limitations are something that others need to worry about, and that our children will, of course, enjoy the same high standard of living that we have had. The notion of limits, and, therefore, the need to make some hard choices for ourselves and our community is very difficult to accept.

Another surprise was how often people wanted to talk about "freedom." Different groups linked freedom to a variety of issues. One concept of freedom relates to fear of crime and personal harm. Concerns that a neighborhood isn't safe makes people feel trapped in their homes or makes them feel as though parts of their community are off limits to them. Women in particular often make choices about the use of public transit based upon their perception of risk in the walk from the bus stop to home. If they can't afford a car and if they are afraid to use transit, their freedom of movement is effectively diminished. More explicit were freedom issues related to the automobile. The advertising industry has done a very good job of convincing most people in this community that there is a direct relationship between being able to drive where one wants when one wants and being free.

The process of exploring the community's values led city officials to develop "The Framework Policies." These policies are grounded in the core community values of environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic security, and they establish goals for the community to work towards in a manner consistent with their values.

The next step was to identify which specific problems need to be solved. City officials and staff used a variety of mechanisms to identify the issues to be addressed. Seattle was the first city in North America to do a full Comparative Environmental Risk to Human

Health analysis based upon the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency model. Through this analysis, we learned that the number one environmental issue our plan needed to address was air quality degradation associated with vehicle emissions. The second most serious problem was water quality degradation associated with auto related pollutants and increased surface water run-off created by sprawl. Noise ranked third along with indoor air quality.

We also utilized surveys, focus groups, random sampling, and community meetings to find out what was bothering Seattle's

citizens the most. Lack of quality in the school system, traffic congestion, concerns about crime, loss of "family wage" jobs, and environmental decline were the most often mentioned, with schools and traffic being a focus at every meeting. As is true for any urban area, many problems were identified. These were the most prominent.

We finally had the two products necessary to define a preferred future for the City--knowledge of what the community values and which problems they believe need to be solved. These are critical to understanding what broad-based political agreements are possible. Without the broad-based political agreements, i.e., community ownership of the vision and the related goals, the plan would have little relevance over time.

Values in Conflict

To continue to stimulate community conversation and involvement, to encourage constructive conflict, and to see if agreement was possible, we engaged the community in a new debate. While developing the draft plan and strategy in 1993, we held a series of forums with the community and the region. It became very clear, not only to us but also to the citizens of the region, that conflicts in the community's values created significant barriers to problem solving.

For example, given the region's development patterns over the past two decades and economic restructuring, which has moved us away from dependence on resource industries, employment is no longer concentrated in the central city. The result of sprawling residential development, increases in multiple wage earners per household, and an increase in the number of careers each of us will have in our lifetime, has been that the automobile is the primary source of mobility and is critical to the individual's ability to gain economic security. However, as much as we value economic security, we also value environmental preservation. A major conflict exists because the means by which we

presently maintain independence and economic security is also the principle cause of environmental decline.

However, we also realized that environmental preservation may in fact be the key to future economic security. According to *FORTUNE* magazine's survey of the best places in America for international business, the City of Seattle and the central Puget Sound region's advantages in a global economy are: our environmental quality, our transportation system (good port, rail access to the rest of the country and a good airport), and a skilled work force. Continued degradation of the environment will cause our region to lose one of its competitive advantages.

This combination of values and problems, like many other combinations, creates some very vexing dilemmas. If economic security means we must focus upon environmental preservation, and if environmental preservation means we must reduce the use of the automobile, and if reducing the use of the automobile means reducing economic security, how do we proceed? Working through this puzzle and many more like it, with individuals and community groups, led the planning department to develop a comprehensive plan for the city entitled "Toward a Sustainable Seattle." More commonly, the press and the public refer to this plan as the "Urban Village Strategy."

Urban Villages

The Urban Village concept is the key component in shaping future growth in Seattle. It identifies the neighborhood as the basic building block of the city. The Urban Village strategy proposes to direct new development to create focused, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, and transit-connected centers or villages. Specifically, it is designed to focus growth to reinforce existing neighborhood centers, enabling people to live near shopping, transit stops, and where they work, reducing their dependence on the private automobile and meeting housing needs for a diverse population by creating higher density options. The strategy also directs public investments into amenities that create a sense of neighborhood and are shared by neighborhood residents, protects neighborhoods from changes that would change their character, and seeks to continue large-scale public involvement by citizens in shaping their environment and fostering a liveable region.

The Urban Village strategy, the basis for our Comprehensive Plan, is also about behavioral change. At its core are two objectives: one is to make it easier for people to change their behaviors by providing them alternatives which do less harm but appeal to their core values, and the other is to influence the marketplace so

that people make more money doing things that are good for society and less money doing things that harm us.

It has become quite apparent through this planning process that no set of laws or regulations will cure our ills. At the root of each issue, be it social, economic, or environmental, are the discrete choices each of us makes on a daily basis.

Achieving mass behavioral change is difficult under any circumstances. Given our values, property rights laws, and political traditions emphasizing the rights of the individual, forcing people to change is out of the question. When pushed, people here believe it is their job to push back. If pushed too hard, they will put someone in office who won't push them at all.

For example, using knowledge we have learned about our community's values, we now know why people get so upset when we tell them they should drive less or not at all. They don't hear us asking them to incur some inconvenience on behalf of societal environmental goals, instead they hear us telling them that the government is taking away what they consider to be a basic freedom. If people in this community are to change their behaviors to meet their environmental values, then we need to find substitutes for the sense of freedom they get with their cars.

Getting the marketplace to change its behavior may be even more difficult. In the housing market, the developers extrapolate from existing trends and conclude that the housing product people want is the product that they are already building. Even though we have good housing preference studies demonstrating that this is not necessarily true, the region's financial and development interests continue down the same path. Unless the government can affect profits, either by writing down the cost of development that achieves our goals and/or increasing the cost of development that doesn't, the market will not change its behavior. In our country, the needs of the market almost always overwhelm public policy. And in our region, a lack of change in housing development patterns means continued environmental decline.

So, what are we doing about this? We created the Urban Village Strategy--a set of policies, strategies, and investment practices which should result in denser, more walkable neighborhoods with more flexible and personalized public transit. As outlined above, Urban Villages focus on making more compact and less consumptive living more attractive by providing better amenities like parks, libraries, community centers, transportation facilities, cultural amenities, and education infrastructure. We are increasing the densities for jobs and housing allowed within the village centers, and

Designating Urban Villages

Urban Villages are identified and designated at three scales of development:

Urban Center Villages

These are intended to accommodate a broad mix of activity and will receive most of the future residential and employment growth. Thus, they will be the most densely developed portions of the city.

Hub Urban Villages

These follow Urban Center Villages in intensity of development, with concentrated mixed-use cores, diverse residential areas, and excellent transit access.

Residential Urban Villages

These are primarily compact residential neighborhoods with a small, locally oriented business district.

Within the remaining areas of the city outside Urban Villages, locations identified as Neighborhood Anchors are designated to provide a transit and service focus for surrounding, low-density residential areas. In the long-term future, some additional concentration of low-density residential development may be desirable in these surrounding areas, but provisions for such changes would only occur through a neighborhood planning process.

reducing the development capacity outside the centers. We are making the environmental assessment process a public cost within the villages and a private cost outside the villages. We are changing the uses allowed within the villages so that, like it was 30 years ago or so, housing will be above shops. And finally, we are increasing the public share of the cost of basic infrastructure in the villages and increasing the private share outside.

Planning or Anti-planning?

Some refer to our Comprehensive Plan as "neo-traditional" planning. I prefer Andres Duany's reference to our plan as "anti-planning." He refers to our efforts that way because we are attempting to counter at least 30 years of practice that has devastated our cities and spawned destruction of much of our once abundant environmental quality. And we, planners and community alike, have done this with the best of intentions as we work to "give people what they want."

In Seattle, we were responding to every problem by

giving people more of what they said they wanted (and often more than what they have asked for). When the roads were full and citizens complained of congestion, we built wider roads rather than talk about what alternatives might meet mobility needs. When we were out of water, we seldom questioned how much water we should be using; we just built another dam or drilled another well. When we started to feel a little cramped, we invested in freeways to open up new land for development. As planners, we have compartmentalized our thinking, focused on specialization and expertise, and, as a result, have possibly lost sight of life's complexities. We risk forgetting the importance of understanding the relationships between the physical form (land-use, transportation, housing, community facilities, utilities, and design) and the kinds of behaviors that form encourages or discourages. We seemed to have lost sight of the reasons cities exist--to serve the needs of people.

We felt this was not the good planning that our city needed. Which brings us back to the charge Mayor Rice gave us when we started the whole comprehensive planning process: "make good planning into good politics." How does good planning become good politics? I am still trying to figure this out. It is unlikely that I will ever be able to say with confidence that I know "the answer." However, some of the key ingredients have become clear. They are:

- (1) Good planning is about people, not things. If it isn't directed toward giving people the opportunity to live fuller and more satisfying lives, then we may be missing the point of all of this.
- (2) Good planning is about ends, not means. For example, planning a transit system (a means toward mobility) without considering the societal ends to be served may not lead us toward increasing the quality of our society.
- (3) Good planning addresses what is, not what one might wish were true. In order for plans to be useful guides toward problem solving, they must be based on a clear understanding of the nature of the community, both good and bad.
- (4) Good planning must be focused on success for the society, not winning for the individual. Recognizing that self-interest drives much of our individual behaviors is not the same thing as abandoning the notion of a higher public interest to be served through our plans. Alexander Hamilton, in *The Federalist Papers*, gave definition to our role. "Why has government been instituted at all?" he asked. "Because the passions of men will not

conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint.”

(5) Good planning embraces complexity, it doesn't avoid it. Most people want problems and solutions discussed with clarity and common sense. That is not the same thing as being simplistic. People's lives are very complex and they know, intuitively, that the rest of the world is pretty complex as well. The short-term benefit to be gained by framing problems and opportunities simplistically are far outweighed by the long-term costs associated with a loss of confidence in government institutions as people realize we have “sheltered” them from the truth.

(6) Good planning must recognize that myths and beliefs are much more powerful than facts. I have never encountered a fact that could stand up to a really good myth, at least in the short-term. As we attack the problems in our communities we need to think about creating myths that encourage positive behavioral change if we are to compete with the myths created by those who are profiting from the status quo.

Here in Seattle, the State Growth Management Act gave us a new impetus to revitalize the planning process. As noted by Mayor Norman B. Rice in his letter at the beginning of *An Issues Guide to the Mayor's Recommended Comprehensive Plan*, “the planning process has become a vehicle for us to make basic choices about how we can achieve our fundamental goals.” The Seattle City Council adopted a comprehensive plan, “Toward a Sustainable Seattle” on July 25, 1994. There is not unanimity over the preferred future we have chosen or over the strategies we are going to use to achieve that future, but a vast majority support the decisions made. We know that things will change and the plan will need to adapt to those changes as new information becomes available. But, we now have a goal of sustainability and, with that goal, we can harness our resources to help make Seattle an even better city. CP

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