

The Process is More Important than the Product

During the past ten years, I've shaped, written, or edited the gamut of planning products from thousand page regional development plans, city comprehensive plans and school district reorganization plans to ten-page briefs on project design. In spite of these efforts, I've spent a good bit of time disassociating myself from "planners." My typical line has been, "Please don't think of me as a planner...My field is communications."

Why this comment? Because I sense that the term "planner" is more often than not a nasty word. "Those planners got in the way of our getting anything done at the legislature." "All that planners care about is keeping zoning codes pure." "What makes sense to planners doesn't make common sense or political sense." "Planners don't seem to have much contact with reality."

Obviously, some of these comments are sheer guff. What has made sense to me, however, is their implication that planners are frequently isolated from the day-to-day decision-making of government officials or other line managers. In my experience, elected officials who are able to spin a balance wheel in their heads and thus calculate how many constituents are on each side

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of each issue tend to avoid planners because they see them as trouble makers, more dangerous than useless. The danger they see is that some commitment to an image of the future will mean their loss of authority when the voting begins on a critical issue. They don't see planners as facilitators for their most important decision-making -- which tends to involve budget decisions.

Now the pressure is on. Elected officials are laying off planners as "soft" line items in their budgets when they cut back expenditures in the face of shrinking revenues. For those of us who see planning as an everyday, ordinary, essential process to help decision makers manage and facilitate change, it's time to come out of the closet, speak our piece, and demonstrate that planning is useful and relevant to elected officials. This requires that we focus at least as much on process as on content.

It's appropriate and necessary for planners to develop decision-making processes which will:

- focus on planning objectives;
- encompass the needs defined by managers of line agencies;
- invite review by outside agencies; including community representatives; and
- leave intact the authority of elected officials to make decisions.

Unless these four elements are accommodated, elected officials will make decisions irrelevant or contradictory to existing plans, agency needs, or community perspectives. It is particularly important that officials take account of planning, line agency, and community perspectives within a "priority framework" as they make the harsh budget decisions which are now required at the local, state, and federal levels of government.

The decision making process used in Minneapolis since 1979 to determine the city's capital improvement budget illustrates these points. Figure 1 is a flow chart showing the capital improvement budget process. The steps of the process follow the numbered boxes:

1. The City Council passes an annual capital improvement resolution setting out the schedule for the preparation of the annual capital budget and updated five-year capital improvement plan.
2. The city's comprehensive plan, which addresses eight functional planning areas (housing, economic development, physical environment, transportation, property services, human development, health and safety, and general management), guides the Planning Department in the preparation of the five-year improvement framework.
3. The five-year capital improvement framework, the critical element in this process, is prepared by the Planning Department in conjunction with the Office of Budget and Evaluation. It is revised and adopted by the City Council each year, and includes:
 - estimates of revenues for the following five-year period;
 - objectives for each of the comprehensive plan's functional areas, with the

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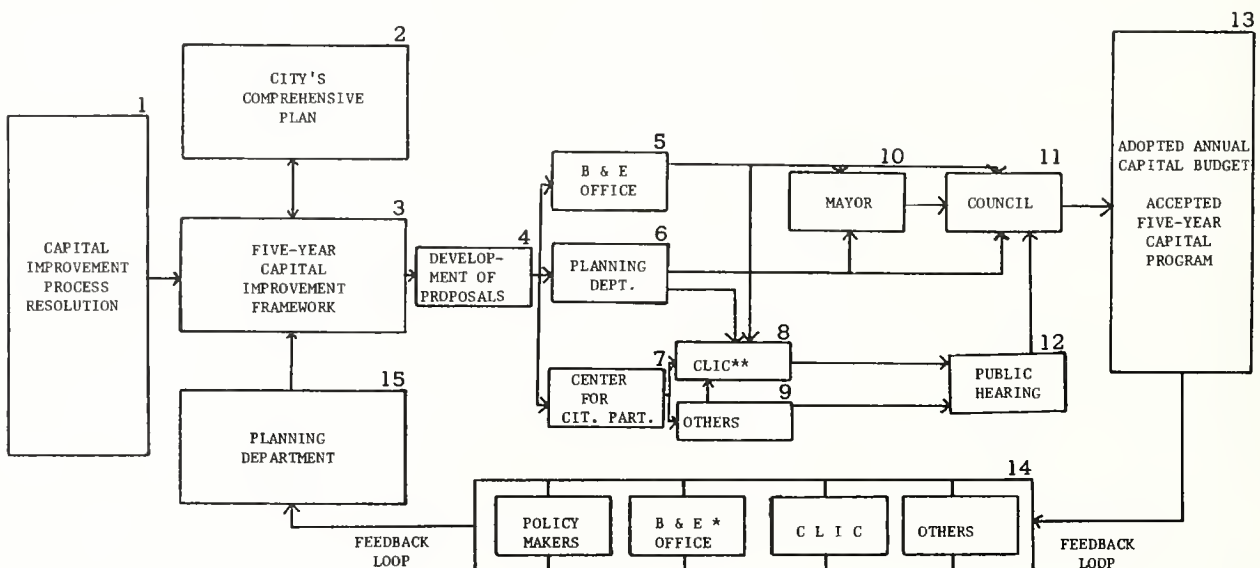
strategy for accomplishing each objective, and a request for specific proposals to implement the strategy;

- criteria which are used to judge budget proposals on the basis of spending priorities, contribution to implementation of the comprehensive plan, and cost effectiveness; and
- rating forms to apply the weighted criteria to judge budget proposals.

4. Public agencies and non-profit organizations seeking city funds develop proposals for the next year's capital budget (example 1984) and for four additional years (example 1984-1988). Together, the proposals form the basis of the next five-year capital improvement program.
5. Proposals are filed with the city's Budget and Evaluation Office which comments on those which it believes may have some financial problems.
6. Copies of proposals are distributed to the Planning Department, which reviews proposals to determine if they conform to the city's comprehensive plan.
7. Other copies are sent to the Center for Citizen Participation.
8. The Center passes copies of proposals to the Capital Long-Range Improvements Committee (CLIC), a city-wide advisory organiza-

tion involving more than 100 citizens (appointed by the Mayor and Council) in three task forces organized on a program area basis. CLIC sends its ratings for the annual budget and five-year program to the Mayor and City Council.

9. The Center for Citizen Participation, through its Public Information unit, also informs citizens' organizations about proposed activities that would affect their neighborhoods.
10. The Mayor considers the recommendations of the Planning Department, the Budget and Evaluation Office, CLIC, and others in formulating recommendations for the annual capital budget and five-year program. The Mayor presents his recommendations to the City Council.
11. The City Council considers the recommendations of the Mayor, Planning Department, Budget and Evaluation Office, CLIC, and others in its deliberations.
12. The Council holds an annual public hearing on the budget and five-year capital improvement program. Representatives of CLIC and other interested persons testify at the public hearing.
13. The City Council adopts a capital budget and accepts the five-year capital improvement program as a guide for future capital budget planning.



* Budget and Evaluation Office

** Capital Long-Range Improvements Committee

14. The "feedback loop" represents a flow of information generated throughout the process by its participants as well as by regular collection of data on the implementation of objectives and community impacts by the Budget and Evaluation Office and the Planning Department.
15. The Planning Department collects information flowing along the feedback loop and develops proposals to revise elements of the process.

Key to this process are the criteria described in the five-year capital improvement framework and applied throughout the process of evaluating budget proposals. The criteria, matched to a point system in a rating form, are defined within three categories:

- spending priorities revised each year by the elected officials to judge proposals across program lines;
- priorities matched to the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan; and
- cost and effectiveness criteria. The criteria are applied primarily by CLIC, using the Proposal Evaluation Form. Use of the form results in ratings which are not applied directly to funding decisions but instead used as a guide for discussion of decisions.

The main point about the Minneapolis capital improvement process is that it provides a priority framework for budget decisions which is shaped by the city's planning objectives. The process is driven by the comprehensive plan but does not threaten the authority of elected offi-

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cial. Although it requires the managers of line agencies to consider planning objectives, it also allows them to present and lobby for alternative agency needs. And finally, the process incorporates review by citizen groups with both city-wide and neighborhood perspectives.

The next step is to incorporate comprehensive planning objectives in the process to determine the operating budget. In Minneapolis, both the the City Planning Department and the Budget and Evaluation Office are working together to achieve that objective.

Every planning objective plays out somewhere along the line in budget decisions made by elected officials or other decision-makers. Efforts made by planners to structure the decision making process so that it will take account of planning objectives while facilitating the work of officials will always pay off.

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The Historic Preservation Fund, established in 1975, is currently doing more about the rural abandonment problem than any other agency, and provides a model for local efforts to save historic farmhouses. The Preservation Fund has been operating successfully for several years as a real estate broker in rural areas, obtaining purchase options on historic buildings and reselling or "revolving" them to new owners under protective covenants. The Fund has rescued dozens of rural properties from neglect and has been successful in tapping the market for historic farmhouses through local, regional, and national advertising.

Because it operates throughout the state, the Preservation Fund can have only limited impact in any given area. It is therefore essential that preservationists and sympathetic planners work to establish county and regional revolving funds focusing on rural properties. The Preservation Fund recently convened a meeting of the state's local revolving funds to establish a statewide organization that can furnish information and assistance to existing and prospective local funds.

A private revolving fund forms the heart of an encouraging rural preservation effort now underway in Edgecombe County. The newly formed Historic Preservation Fund of Edgecombe County has obtained two properties by donation and hired a full-time director. Eventually the Edgecombe Fund hopes to revolve five or six properties in the county each year. If the Edgecombe Fund can meet this goal and sustain it for several years, Edgecombe County will have taken a great step toward reversing the decline of its historic farmsteads. The Edgecombe County Historical Society, which created this revolving fund, is also mounting an education program that includes a quarterly newsletter, close cooperation with the county's agricultural extension agents, and research on the county's place names.

There is much that can be done to prolong the useful life of our state's historic farmsteads, but we do not have the luxury of delaying action for long. If we do nothing, the rural architectural heritage of this traditionally rural state will inevitably disappear -- and much of North Carolina's special identity will vanish along with it.

Editors note: This article is based on a study of historic preservation in rural North Carolina conducted by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History in 1980 and published as Historic Preservation in North Carolina: Problems and Potentials in 1982. Copies of the study are available from the Historic Preservation Society of North Carolina, Inc., 11 S. Blount St., Raleigh, NC 27601, for \$5.00.