

Community Leadership & the Cincinnati Planning Commission

by Laurence C. Gerckens, AICP

It's easy to sit back and wait for problems to arrive at the planning commission. All of a commissioner's time can be spent stamping out brushfires and processing standard reviews. But it is worth recalling that citizen planning commissioners were put in that position not to execute administrative chores for city council, but to provide insights into the problems and potential of the community, and to provide leadership in the solution of problems before they arise. Consider the history of the Cincinnati Planning Commission:

On January 4, 1914, a group of civic-minded individuals and representatives of the community development committees of



Alfred Bettman, leader of Cincinnati's citizen planning movement. Photo courtesy of the Cincinnati Planning Department.

a number of Cincinnati organizations founded the "United City Planning Committee." They banded together to exert pressure on a local "boss" system of government nationally known for its inefficiency and corruption. Through the medium of community planning, these Cincinnatians were

seeking a more rational, publicly open, and less expensive system for the provision of needed capital facilities than the system of secret agreements, payoffs, and bribes that determined public development policy in Cincinnati at the time.

The United City Planning Committee, under the leadership of attorney Alfred Bettman, became the nucleus of dedicated citizen planners from which the Cincinnati City Planning Commission evolved. It ran an educational campaign, raised funds (over \$100,000) to pay for preparation of a

long-range community plan, and actively promoted the concept of a rational and open-to-public-scrutiny process of determining future expenditures for public works.  Was Cincinnati First?

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Realizing the need for legislative authority to remove sole control of public expenditures from the machine-corrupted city council, the Committee charged Bettman with drafting state enabling legislation authorizing the creation of local, citizen-dominated municipal planning commissions, giving these groups the power to create and adopt a general development plan for their communities, and to enforce it over the objections of the machine-controlled city councils. In May of 1915 the Ohio legislature enacted the first planning enabling law in the United States, to empower local citizen planning commissions.

The First World War temporarily suspended planning activities in Cincinnati, and then it took a few years to raise the funds needed to prepare a plan. Finally, in 1925, the Cincinnati Planning Commission adopted a long-range "Master Plan" for the City, the first such plan to be officially adopted by the planning commission of a major American city.

The Cincinnati City Planning Commission, which Bettman chaired from 1930

until his death in 1945, became the primary vehicle for sustaining the longest continuous municipal political reform movement in America. It helped bring order, rationality, and economy to Cincinnati through: the integration of future land-uses, transportation facilities, and public utilities and facilities in a long-range comprehensive plan; the use of the land-use zoning power to shape future community form; and the use of carefully prepared six year capital budgets designed to allow for development while keeping tax expenditures at a low, even rate.

Thanks to its Planning Commission, Cincinnati was well prepared to weather the storm of The Great Depression. With an agreed upon plan of action and \$40,000,000 in pre-Crash bond money in hand (acquired in accord with the capital budget), the Commission initiated project after project during the darkest days of the 1930s, creating work for thousands of Cincinnatians. A city once considered the worst governed in America, came to be viewed as a model for American urban reform. The bold and creative efforts of the citizen-member dominated Planning Commission shaped not only the city of Cincinnati, but also, through its example and leadership, the community planning practices of the entire country. ♦

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Was Cincinnati First?

The Cincinnati City Planning Commission was not "technically" America's first city planning commission. Columbus, Ohio, established a temporary commission in 1906, and, in 1907, the State of Connecticut created a planning commission for its capital city, Hartford.

The Columbus commission consisted of architects, a landscape architect, a sculptor, and a promoter-journalist charged with expanding on the design of the environment of a monument to our martyred President, William McKinley. Its members were primarily design professionals who had a singular and limited charge: coming up with a design to enhance the environment of the statue in context of the community.

The Hartford commission consisted solely of elected officials and government employees constituting, in effect, an inter-governmental subcommittee to consider the community environment of the state capital. In contrast, the Cincinnati commission was composed primarily of local citizens and, unlike the Columbus and Hartford commissions, was empowered to adopt a citywide comprehensive plan that became binding on City Council — and did so. [LCG].



Cincinnati Planning Today

by Leon A. Meyer

Cincinnati is currently wrestling with where it is going as a city and how it is going to get there. There are different groups of people focusing on different activities, such as improving downtown, locating new stadiums, improving neighborhoods, and considering mass transit. Everyone is concerned about new jobs and economic development. It is a challenge to pull these efforts together into an integrated whole so that the entire city is moving in the same direction.

However, there are encouraging signs. Downtown Cincinnati, Inc. ("DCI"), a private group with some governmental involvement, has put together — with citizen involvement — a vision statement for downtown Cincinnati. Another encouraging sign is the Cincinnati Neighborhood Action Strategy ("CNAS") which is being developed by the city administration, led by our city manager, John Shirey. CNAS is a way of bringing

the government back to the citizens, specifically by working in partnership with citizens to produce a better city. The city planning department is very involved with this project.

Public involvement is the key to raising the quality of life within our central cities. One of the favorite sayings of one of our city councilors is, "We don't want to raise the expectation of our city by planning something we cannot deliver." While I would generally agree, I would add that good planning can help chart a road or a course for the city to follow. Obviously, there is nothing forcing us to follow that road if other more compelling reasons to take a "detour" should arise during the journey.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat says to Alice, "if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." It is my hope that through good, citizen-based planning our communities can determine where they want to go and the road that will take them there.

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Leadership Training via the Airwaves

The "Civic Television Network" -- or CTN -- is a new concept in providing leadership training for communities. Developed by the American Community Service Network, a non-profit organization with a strong background in providing telecommunications and educational services, the CTN provides interactive training programs through "community site affiliates" -- local organizations that sponsor the CTN and provide a classroom location. The CTN provides the equipment needed to receive the satellite transmission. The 1995 CTN schedule includes four programs: (1) mobilizing community assets; (2) leadership for divided communities; (3) collaborating to compete; and (4) small group problem solving.

Sessions combine taped segments and live instruction transmitted by satellite to each site. During the session, questions can be relayed from the site location to the course instructor. For more detailed information, contact: Rob Schumann, ASCN, 21 Dupont Circle - 4th Fl., Washington, DC 20036; 800-746-6286.