

# Making Change Happen

by Michael Chandler

Twenty-five years ago Alvin Toffler wrote a book entitled *Future Shock*. In it he calculated that there have been 800 lifetimes (of about 62 years each) over the past 50,000 years of human history. For the first 794 of those lifetimes little changed in the way people lived their daily lives.

Rapid change began to occur only a few lifetimes ago, with the invention of the printing press. The effect of this first, raw step in mass communication was explosive. Technological victory after technological victory followed, and by the 798th lifetime the industrial society was firmly in place. What we are left with, according to Toffler, is the reality that it has only been during the past two lifetimes that anyone, anywhere has used an electric motor, driven an automobile, flown an airplane, watched television, or used a computer.

Toffler's work helped many to recognize the enormous impact that change has had on the world we live in. The balance of this column will examine change as a concept, and discuss the role that change can play in the planning process.

Change frequently involves an alteration in how something is done. Change occurs because new information comes into existence, or circumstances surrounding a practice or activity are modified in some way, thereby necessitating the development of a new approach or a new strategy.

It wasn't too many years ago that the "management" of change meant making small, incremental adjustments in how something was done. With the advent of automation and the computer, however, change has taken on a new look. On an almost daily basis we are discovering that it is no longer possible to solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions. There is a constantly growing demand for new ideas, new solutions, and new answers.

There are two fundamentally different strategies for dealing with change. One

strategy is premised on a belief that change is a threat, and should be feared and avoided. Much like a turtle sensing danger, this strategy involves retreating into a "shell" of comfort to ride out the storm.

TAKING HOLD OF  
THE FUTURE, AND  
HELPING TO SHAPE IT,  
ARE ESSENTIAL  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
RESPONSIBILITIES.

The second strategy, in contrast, views change as an opportunity. Rather than being feared, change is pursued with vigor and enthusiasm. This mindset sees change much like the sculptor views a mound of fresh clay — as something to be shaped, molded, and formed.

## INTRODUCING CHANGE

Making change happen is a fundamental planning commission responsibility. A reading of state enabling authority governing planning commission activities clearly establishes that planning commissions are to actively plan for the future, in addition to meeting the needs of the moment. In light of this mandate, planning commissions need to identify strategies that will enable change and the process of change management to become a viable part of the planning process.

One strategy planning commissions might consider involves placing a specific statement or goal in the comprehensive plan that values the management of change in much the same way that efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability are valued. When a philosophy of change becomes ingrained, it helps create a climate that supports and encourages

planned change.

Introducing change can be very much like playing the children's game of "crack the whip." Perhaps you know the game. Everyone is on either ice or roller skates. To play the game, the children form a long line and hold on to whoever is in front of them. The person at one end of the line pulls hard in a particular direction. This starts a motion that increases in velocity until the last person on the opposite end of the line is propelled or "whipped" for a distance at a considerable speed. Note that the person who started the whip in motion is finished moving long before the final effect is carried to the end of the line. The point is that after change is first introduced there may well be lag time before its outcome takes hold.

Planning commissions seeking to effect change in their communities likewise need to bear in mind that change can take time. Nevertheless, a planning commission — like the child who sets the "whip" in motion — is ideally positioned to take the lead in shaping the direction change can take.

Several years ago, noted educator Neil Postman remarked that our society is hurtling into the future with its eyes fixed firmly on the rearview mirror. Postman's observation reflects a line of thinking planning commissions must work to avoid. Taking hold of the future, and helping to shape it, are essential planning commission responsibilities. But they require a mindset that places a positive value on change and the management of change. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike also regularly conducts planning commissioner training programs. His column appears in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.

