

The Role of the Professional Planner

by Perry L. Norton, AICP

[Editor's Note: While most of this issue of the PCJ focuses on the role of the citizen planner, it can be helpful for members of planning commissions and boards to consider, as well, the role of the professional planner].

In thinking about the role of the professional planner, it is helpful first to look back. Before there were professional planners, there were "citizen" planners. They weren't initially called "citizen planners," they were members of civic improvement associations which came into being after the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago — a spectacular showcase of buildings, architecture, and civic design, which inspired business and community leaders across the country to see what they might do to improve their cities.

As the more or less ad hoc improvement associations began to produce ideas, and plans, momentum grew to formalize these activities and to give them more clout in community decision making. In the 1920's, under the stewardship of Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, some model state enabling ordinances were drafted for the creation of official planning boards.

The movement grew rapidly, and as it grew more demands were put on the shoulders of the volunteers who became the members of those planning boards, or commissions. The boards turned for help to people who would, as staff or consultants, conduct studies needed to provide the information the boards needed to make plans for the future of their communities. Thus entered the professionals.

To a very significant degree, that role of providing information is still one of the major functions of professional planners, whether full time staff members in the employ of government, or under contract to provide consulting services to a planning board.

The second role professional planners took on is less prosaic, but perhaps even more important. If planning has something to do with the future, don't we need to have some image of what we think the future ought to be so that we have some reference point to guide our decision making today? The current buzz word for this role is "visioning." The word is new, but the action has been around for a long time — first articulated in the so called Comprehensive Master Plan.

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But it is not a simple process for people, commissioners, and the general public, who have lived their lives in one community, to divest themselves of the baggage of the day to visualize what tomorrow might be. Professional planners took on the role of facilitator or "enabler," helping the citizen boards they worked with to develop a coherent vision of the future of their community, and the means of achieving that future.

There is one more role. From our deliberations we may arrive at what we think is the best decision. But as we know, the best laid plans can go astray. We always need, therefore, to know our options before we take any action. But we need to ask: are we taking the route of least

resistance at the cost of what we hope to achieve? Professional planners can provide the "if this then what" printouts; members of the planning board must pull up their resources to set the course. ♦

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