The Role of the Professional Planner

by Perry L. Norton, AICP

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.

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.