

Your Community's Little Instruction Book

by Lisa Hollingsworth and Jim Segedy

Allow us to introduce ourselves. We've both spent our careers in varying levels of professional advisory capacity with the planning commissions of smaller communities. Before moving to the Kansas City area this past year, Jim worked for many years in Ball State University's Community Based Planning Projects program, providing assistance to more than one hundred communities and many plan commissions (as planning commissions are called in Indiana). He also served on the Plan Commission in Delaware County, Indiana. Lisa spent over a decade as a circuit-riding planner for a regional planning organization serving the western fringe of Metropolitan Atlanta.

Together we will be picking up "The Planning Commission at Work" column, ably written for the Planning Commissioners Journal for many years by our friend Michael Chandler. It is our hope that as a team, we can continue in Mike's fine tradition of taking the mystery out of comprehensive plans and other topics by providing you with plain, down-to-earth information that you can use.

INTRODUCING ... THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

"What does your Comprehensive Plan say about the proposed development?" We both wish we had a nickel for every time at planning commissioner training workshops we've asked participants that question.

When you agreed to take on the job of planning commissioner, you most likely received a copy of the *comprehensive plan*, sometimes called the *master plan*, *municipal plan*, or *overall plan*. That plan is what might be considered your community's *Little Instruction Book*, chock full of basic information about your community – past and future – including the community's goals, and the purpose behind your regulations and programs.

In a nutshell, the comprehensive plan lays out how the community sees itself in the future and how it intends to get

there. The zoning ordinance, which is the other book (along with the zoning map) you probably were handed on your first night, is the set of rules used by the community to implement the plan. The comprehensive plan and the zoning ordinance are *not* the same thing, but they should relate closely to each other.

Much of what you'll be asked to do as a member of the planning commission, including every zoning change request or new development project you're asked to consider, must be evaluated on how well it fits within the community's goals established in the comprehensive plan and the ordinances. To be effective, your plan *and* ordinances should be consistent with each other.

The comprehensive plan has a critical role: it establishes the intent and goals of the community. We have both seen too many communities that have not fully utilized their comprehensive plans as their guide when making important decisions and get themselves into real trouble when making decisions not grounded on what's set out in their plan.

A Good Recipe Needs Good Ingredients

What does it take to make a good comprehensive plan? We need to answer that question with another question – actually five questions: (1) Who are we? (2) Where are we going? (3) Where do we want to go? (4) How do we get there? and the often overlooked (5) Are we there yet?

The answer to these questions will give you a good understanding of what your community is, what it has to work with, and where it sees itself down the road. Then it's just a matter of effectively using your comprehensive plan to understand what it will take to be your guide to the health, safety, and welfare of the community, and what your plan can and cannot do for you.

In the next several columns we will

go into greater depth on each of the five questions and show you how your plan can identify your community's shortcomings, highlight its successes, and establish priorities.

It's important to remember that change is going to happen with or without you. A good comprehensive plan will mean the difference between the community deciding its future by choice or getting its future by chance. Your plan can be changed as your community changes, to reflect the new priorities that emerge as new opportunities reveal themselves. Your plan can be the foundation for developing effective policies, programs, and practices; it can build public support for community improvements; and it can provide guidance for budgeting and programming.

Your comprehensive plan can and should be your community's *Little Instruction Book*, a guide regularly referred to. But if your plan simply sits on the shelf after being adopted ... then something's amiss. As a planning commissioner one of your key responsibilities is to ensure that your community's comprehensive plan is, in fact, an effective, well-used document. ♦



We're devoting 2008 to helping you understand how comprehensive plans can be used, and how to make sure you have the most usable plan possible. In coming columns, we'll focus on the details of preparing a comprehensive plan (or plan update), including how to create a plan with instant success. If you have "war stories" you'd like to share with us, or questions you'd like us to address, please email us at: jsegedy@oaconsulting.com.