

Winning Over A Community To New Ideas

by Otis White

Editor's Note: In our last issue, Otis White examined the impact that planning commissioner Reeve Hennion had on Jackson County, Oregon. In this issue, White takes a look at another planning commissioner who helped change the direction of his community.

Not many people join a planning commission with a headful of ideas about improving zoning, but Thomas Hylton did. More surprising, in a few years' time, Hylton had talked his community, Pottstown, Pennsylvania, into rewriting its entire zoning code and instituting a whole new way of judging proposed developments.

He did this in three ways: by presenting his ideas so convincingly that it calmed what might otherwise have been a furious opposition; by bringing a unique set of resources to his cause; and by spending an extraordinary amount of time and attention in winning over citizens and elected officials. In doing so, Hylton offers a textbook case of how planning commissioners – and others with little or no formal power – can be change agents in their communities.

Granted, Tom Hylton was not a typical citizen planner. For one thing, he's a Pulitzer Prize winner. He won his

Pulitzer in 1990 for a series of editorials in the Pottstown newspaper about saving the farmland and open spaces of South-eastern Pennsylvania. For another, he has made himself something of an expert in small-town development. After retiring from the newspaper, he spent years traveling the country, writing a book, and producing a television documentary about preserving traditional towns.

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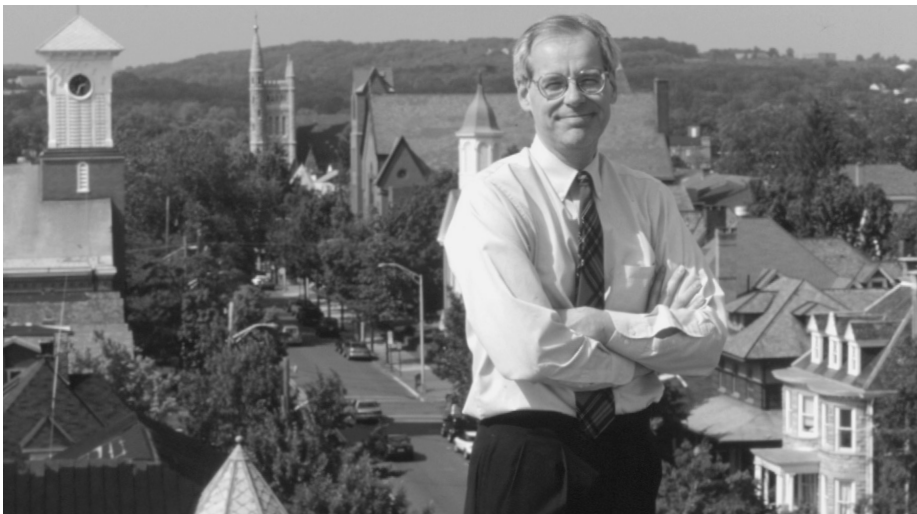
But what this means is that when he joined the Pottstown Planning Commission in 1999, he began with clear notions about how places like Pottstown, 35 miles north of Philadelphia, ought to deal with development. It didn't tell him how to win acceptance of his ideas. That came to him as he served on the commission and later became its chair.

Hylton's big idea was to change from traditional zoning, which seeks to separate land uses, to what some call "form-based zoning," which focuses on how buildings blend in with their surroundings more than how they're used. For Pottstown, with its buildings that date to the 18th century, this meant encouraging new construction that fit the town's existing "form."

Form-based zoning is a bold idea that generates a good deal of enthusiasm in academic and professional planning circles, but often disappears quickly when raised in communities. Why's that? Accustomed to the idea of separating land uses (industrial here, residential there, retail in between), many citizens have trouble understanding a different approach. City councils are also wary. They don't like to fix problems that aren't obvious. And then there are the developers, who don't like being told how their projects should look – or simply don't want to see the rules changed.

When Hylton took on the task of championing a new way of zoning, then, the deck was stacked against him, as it is with change in most communities. And Pottstown wasn't a place that welcomed new ideas. On the contrary, says Karen Weil, who served with Hylton on the planning commission and before that was the borough (or city) council president, "the first thing they say is no, we can't do that."

So how did Tom Hylton get people to say yes to a whole new way of zoning, one that at the time was unique in Pennsylvania? First, say those who watched him, he introduced the idea the right way – almost off-handedly. Ray Lopez, who was Pottstown's director of code enforcement, notes that Hylton focused first on the problems caused by traditional zoning. He'd say something like, "Wouldn't it be good for the town if. ..." Lopez recalls.



Thomas Hylton with downtown Pottstown behind him.

It was only after the problems were discussed thoroughly by the planning commission that Hylton began talking about solutions. “He was very intelligent about how he brought it about,” Lopez adds.

And there were problems with Pottstown’s zoning. Over the years, the town had adopted what Hylton called “suburban-style” zoning without thinking about how it affected an older community that was nearly built out. The setback requirements alone precluded most infill developments, as the remaining lots weren’t big enough.

How did he go from talking about problems to talking about solutions – ones that involved rethinking the town’s zoning philosophy? He did it by framing his unfamiliar ideas in familiar language. One way was to connect it with the sense of pride most people had in their neighborhoods, Karen Weil says. “People want to preserve their neighborhood,” she explains. And that’s exactly what Hylton said the new approach would do, preserve the look and feel of Pottstown’s neighborhoods.

He had a clever way of explaining this, notes Jack Wolf, who was borough council president when the new zoning approach came up for discussion. Hylton told people that, if an older home burned down in Pottstown, it probably couldn’t be built back as it was. Present zoning laws wouldn’t allow it, but form-based zoning would. All in all, as Karen Weil adds, “what he proposed made a lot of sense.”

Making sense was one thing. Creating momentum for change was another. It meant overcoming what economists call “transition costs.” These are the costs incurred whenever you move from one way of doing things to another. Some costs may be financial, others might involve expenditures of time and energy. And this is where Hylton brought in the second of his contributions: a unique set of resources.

The greatest transition cost in Pottstown was financial. The town had no money to spare for rewriting its zoning ordinances. So Hylton tapped the network of contacts he had built during

the research for his book and documentary, helping a local nonprofit obtain a grant from the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia to cover the costs of the revisions. (Later, the town also received a grant from the state and added a small amount itself.)

This is a hallmark of people who lead without power. Without access to government resources, they often find unexpected ways of overcoming obstacles. And they do so by using assets or connections that might not be obvious or available to others. It’s unlikely that anyone else in Pottstown could have found and persuaded a foundation to underwrite a revision of the town’s zoning ordinances. Tom Hylton’s contacts were key.

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That brings us to the last contribution Hylton made: an enormous investment of his time and attention. It helped, of course, that he was retired. But even so, he took “hands-on” to a new level. As it turned out, the grant wasn’t used as one might expect, to hire an outside consulting firm to do all the work. Instead, Hylton advocated a more strategic approach: hiring a consultant to help lay the legal groundwork for the ordinance. Then Hylton took the lead in working with developers and homeowners who wanted to build things in Pottstown. And who worked on drafting the new ordinances? Tom Hylton did, with review by county zoning officials, consultants, and the town’s attorney.

Hylton did all of this because he recognized that a legal challenge – or even the threat of one – would alarm the borough council. The consultant was able to document that most of Pottstown was eligible for historic preservation protection, helping provide legal support for

the form-based zoning approach. Hylton also saw that developers might oppose the zoning changes because they were so different from what other places required. So he suggested that some of the grant money be used to retain three design professionals to help developers modify their projects once the ordinance was enacted. This helped ease developers’ concerns.

This offers yet another lesson for leaders looking to create change in their communities: there’s no substitute for foresight. The best way to deal with objections is to anticipate them, and Hylton was always a step ahead of potential problems.

The result for Pottstown is a model of form-based zoning. The ordinances Hylton drafted are unusually clear and accessible – with photographs that illustrate the “forms” of Pottstown’s neighborhoods. Ray Lopez still marvels at Hylton’s work. “This was really something new. ... Everybody really liked the ‘lightness’ of the document.”

The changes, which were adopted in 2003, have had an impact on Pottstown – among other things, creating a wave of infill development. Commercial developments look better, too. Hylton takes pride in a McDonald’s restaurant that fits its surroundings better, with parking in the side and rear, trees in its parking lot, historic street lights, and brick columns.

Looking back, Hylton recalls few bumps on the road to form-based zoning in Pottstown. The planning commission itself was unusually harmonious. “We rarely had any disagreements,” he remembers. “We were of one mind.” But that may be a result of having a chair who knew what he wanted – and had the knowledge, skills, and foresight to get it. ♦

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