

What Are You Guys Doing To Fix It?

by Della Rucker, AICP, CECd

Many of our local economies are not healthy. Our news is full of closing stores and vacant big boxes, plummeting housing values, and holes in government budgets. If you're on a planning commission, try going to a party at your neighbors' house. Sooner or later you'll get asked: "What are you guys doing to fix it?"

We know we aren't responsible for all these events. But the question nags: "What are you guys doing to fix it?"

If we take our responsibilities seriously, then perhaps we *can* help fix it. To do that, we need to think ahead, anticipate consequences, and identify our blind spots so that we aren't sideswiped by a future we didn't see coming.

To make wise decisions, we need to plan wisely. But what does that mean?

- **Goals that mean what they say.** We don't need the mealy-mouthed stuff we often get for goals. We need goals that our community understands, rallies around, and works toward. If a goal does not make people want to act, that goal is useless.

The word "encourage" should not appear in a plan's goals or objectives, unless there is a very solid reason for doing so. If I encourage my son to study for a test, "encouraging" him is not the goal. "Pass the test" is the goal. Inserting the word "encourage" in a plan is almost always a cop out, which is why officials sometimes like it for goals they don't want to support. If you cannot get support beyond "encourage," then define what the parties involved can support, or cut the goal out.

- **Don't assume that the future will be a direct extension of the past.** How many population projections have you seen? How many decisions do we base on those numbers? How often do those numbers turn out to be right? We too

often plan the way we do because that's what a projection indicates. We need to stop treating a projection as a *fait accompli*. What matters isn't the numbers, but what they tell us about the issues we face, and how we influence or adapt to those changes.

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As planning historian Laurence Gerckens has noted, too many local plans have been "premised on the projection or continuation of past trends." The resulting problem is that these plans "rarely reflected any vision for positive change [and] rarely addressed past inadequacies and injustices."¹

- **Be clear about fiscal impacts.** No one likes taxes, but your community needs them. We know that if development costs more than it generates in taxes, we have a problem. Do the math or pay someone else to do it. But if someone else does it, make sure you understand what they did and why.

- **Model your public participation effort after what the best teachers do.** Don't lecture, or allow others to lecture. Give the process structure so that people stay on track and so that you hear from everyone. Engage people in the search for solutions, rather than presenting a plan and waiting for them to applaud or throw tomatoes. The public needs to understand the issues and lend their expertise to the search for solutions. If you give them a chance, they'll come through.

¹ Laurence Gerckens, FAICP, "K is for Knowledge" in *Planning ABC's* (2003); available at: <www.plannersweb.com/abcs.html>.

- **Admit that putting colors on a map isn't doing enough.** If you are serious about improving your community, you need to plan for much more than just how land is categorized and zoned. Drawing up a multi-colored land use map is only part of the process. Putting together an effective local plan needs to draw on the work and involvement of planners, planning commissioners, and many others from the community.

Why have I said all this, and made points that may sound self-evident? Because many of us (myself included) have been guilty – at least on occasion – of setting meaningless goals, treating projections as immutable facts, and failing to adequately engage the broader community in a search for solutions. For whatever reasons, we've taken the easy way out, or didn't want to rock the boat.

So what can we do to help fix our counties, cities, or towns, and make them more resilient? We can do what planners and planning commissioners have long been called on to do – view our communities as a whole; see what's working and what isn't; leverage the wisdom of our neighbors; and lead development of goals, policies, and objectives that will truly help us do the hard work of moving our communities forward. ♦

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