

Think Regionally, Act Locally

by Jim Segedy, FAICP, and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

Have you ever been riding along in your car and been able to tell exactly when you entered the city limits by the change in the road pavement? Have you ever looked at the streetscape and known right where the corporate boundary is just by the way land uses change abruptly? You don't need to see the sign to know that you are in a different place. It is obvious to you that one community treated their boundary as a hard edge, and where they adjoined the neighboring community, there was no thought put into a seamless appearance of the pavement, or perhaps even of the physical development.

Each community has its identity – and that's very important – but no community is an island. In today's mobile and global economy, the decisions that you as a planning commissioner will make must recognize the relationships, impacts, and opportunities of not only your community, but also the communities that surround you. Even in the days of the company town where everyone lived, worked, shopped, and played in the same place, people had to share resources with their neighbors.

Your job as a planning commissioner is to address your community's future, but the decisions you are asked to make sometimes have impacts beyond your own city or town. Those decisions can call for you to think regionally while acting locally.

Your first obligation in preparing to deal with regional impacts is to ensure that your community's comprehensive plan identifies potential regional issues

and provides a mechanism for addressing them – including input from and communication with affected parties outside your jurisdiction. Your second obligation is to consider the regional implications of your plan implementation actions.

In last Fall's issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* (PCJ #76), Greg Dale pointed out two areas which particularly beg for you as the planning commissioner to look beyond your community's boundary when making decisions: (1) systems: natural environmental, transportation, and housing; and (2) land use impacts on adjacent/nearby communities, particularly traffic caused by major retail.



What happens at your municipal border?

While Dale's article focused on ethical reasons for why a planning commission should balance the interest of a community against the broader region, this is not just an ethical issue. It is also one of practicality and common sense.

Walls to Communication

A few years ago, Lisa assisted a city in undertaking a complete revision of its zoning ordinance prompted by the spillover growth coming from the nearby major metropolitan area. The need for this new zoning ordinance had been identified in the city's comprehensive plan.

There was a small group of people who lived just a few hundred feet beyond the city limits in the unincorporated county. They wanted to volunteer to serve on the ad hoc committee that was assisting the planning commission with developing the new ordinance. These individuals had long-standing ties to the community. The city was where they collected their mail, bought their groceries, paid their water bill, and attended church. Their children went to schools inside the city. However, since they were not actually voting, tax-paying residents of the city, their request to join the committee was turned down.

Later, when the planning commission heard development permit requests that would have affected traffic generation, land use patterns, and property values of these concerned non-citizens, elected officials instructed the commission to ignore impacts beyond the city's border. It was like placing a brick wall at the city limit.

As a planning commissioner, do you see the "lose/lose" outcome of this example?

First, the city missed out on hearing valuable perspectives from people with authentic connections to the city – and who were willing to put in the time to help craft a good zoning ordinance. Second, by limiting the scope of the permit review process, the city set itself up for abrupt and incompatible land use patterns at its border. Moreover, the city lessened the county's interest in receiving city input concerning development permits for major projects outside the city limits.

Walls of this kind can stop communications in both directions.

Coordinating With Multi-Jurisdictional Bodies

Coordinating your comprehensive plan with local school districts (which frequently cross political boundaries) and shared public services will not only allow proactive consideration of regional issues, but can enable plan implementation to take advantage of economies of scale.

We can't over-emphasize the importance of coordinating your community plan with the school board, the water and sewer authority, or any other entity whose service area impacts your community, particularly if it also crosses political boundaries.

Getting Assistance

As a planning commissioner, where do you turn for assistance with information, data, maps, and analysis to think regionally and act locally?

Luckily, every state has a system of regional planning organizations available to assist you. While their name, scope of services, and business relationship with cities and towns will vary from state to state, they typically offer valuable assistance. Upon your local government's request, they can usually provide regional information on transportation systems, housing needs and trends, demographics, economic development, natural and historic resources, infrastructure, environmentally sensitive resources, and other issues.

Regional planning agencies may also be able to assist you in public involvement activities and coordination with other jurisdictions.

Other important resources you can avail include your state planning agency and the extension program of your land grant university. Many universities have service learning programs through which planning, architecture, or landscape architecture students can provide your community with assistance. Jim and his students assisted over one hundred communities during his two-decade tenure at Ball State University. If you're not sure how to access these resources, a quick call to your regional planning agency will get you started.

Taking Regional Impacts Into Account

Some suggestions for how to think regionally while acting locally:

- revisit your comprehensive plan to ensure that you've adequately considered regional issues.
- consider adding a check box to your development permit review checklist to specify the type of review or comment opportunity that your planning commission needs in order to address the regional implications of proposed local developments.
- look into allowing for public hearing input from parties outside of your corporate boundary.
- work with your counterparts in adjoining jurisdictions to formulate a system for sharing the benefits and drawbacks of development and regional demands, be it resources or services.

The important thing is to fine-tune your process so you can avoid those abrupt, incompatible changes in land use that, just like changes in pavement, tell everyone that now they're in a different community. ♦

Jim is the Director of Community Planning for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. Lisa is the Associate Director for River Restoration for American Rivers' Pittsburgh field office. Their respective positions require them to foster regional thinking and local action for communities that share natural resources and environmentally sensitive areas.



How It's Done in Georgia

Georgia employs a "development of regional impact" (DRI) approach to regional coordination of land use decisions.

The DRI process establishes separate thresholds for developments in urban and rural areas. Any permit request that exceeds the appropriate threshold automatically triggers the DRI process, which provides for review and comment from surrounding units of governments and the regional planning council. While these comments are advisory only, input from affected neighboring communities has benefited the development permitting process.

Georgia also has a formal mediation process that allows neighboring jurisdictions to negotiate the issues of concern when development in one community poses impacts on an adjacent community. In many ways, this is like the environmental impact process which should be integral to all comprehensive plans.



Online Comments:

"It may be a good strategy to consider joint development and design standards among different jurisdictions to avoid the abrupt transitions mentioned by the authors. Orange County, Florida, has adopted joint design standards with three municipalities for West State Road 50, a major commercial corridor, to improve the appearance of the corridor and promote redevelopment and infill development, which are goals at the heart of the County's planning process. For details, see: www.orangecountyfl.net/cms/DEPT/growth/planning/urban/wsr50.htm."

– Susan Caswell, AICP, Planning Manager, Orange County, Florida

"This is an important topic that lies right at the intersection of psychology, finances, taxes,

land use rights and responsibilities, and politics. As we all know, environmental, economic, and other plans and impacts do not stop at political boundaries; yet laws and legal responsibilities often do. Then there's the human and psychological drama, along with turf and control issues, involved in organizations. We've had challenges getting our elementary school, high school, and public libraries to have a rational discussion together about whether to even consider the idea of sharing space or resources. Ideally, entities such as regional planning commissions, watershed councils, and similar organizations can help transcend town by town politics and thinking."

– Lee A. Krohn, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Manchester, Vermont