Building on Common Ground

By Joseph R. Molinaro, AICP

Do you ever find yourself sitting through a planning commission meeting and thinking "haven't we discussed this issue before?" Do you sometimes get the feeling that the endless debates do not shed any new light on the issue?

As planning commissioners, professional planners, citizen planners, builders, and developers, it is up to us to set the stage for higher-quality development and better-planned communities. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel with each discussion, perhaps we can reach consensus on some issues.

We need to agree on what approaches have *not* worked. We also need to accept the fact that development does and will occur, so we can focus on the key issues that *do* make a difference. Most importantly, we need to develop ways of having more productive discussions about these issues.

Discard Outdated Ideas

One of today's best sellers, *Reinventing Government*, examines innovation in government. David Osborne, one of the book's authors, has said that he believes the greatest obstacle to innovation is "the power of outdated ideas."

The fields of planning and development are plagued with outdated ideas. Even though the evidence is clear that these ideas do not work, they nonetheless prevail and have power over people.

One of these old ideas concerns the desirability of large lots and low-density development. We now know that developing homes with large lots does *not* preserve farmland and does *not* preserve rural character. Large lots incur higher public service cost and force people to drive longer distances. As a planning tool, low density development has been a failure.

Some home builders believe that customers want large lots, but consumer preference surveys conducted by the National Association of Home Builders show that a large lot is one of the first features homebuyers are willing to forego to obtain the home they want. Consumers are most interested in getting the most house for their money in a good neighborhood. And yet, many builders, planners, and public officials remain fixated on large lots.

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Another outdated idea is that wide neighborhood streets are safe and desirable. In fact, just the opposite is true. Wider streets encourage people to drive faster and more carelessly. Research has shown that narrow streets force people to drive slower. Analysis of accident data shows that a child hit by a car traveling at 15 to 20 miles per hour will probably survive, while a child hit at 35 miles per hour will probably die. Yet, in most communities, local regulations still require wide streets, thereby encouraging faster-moving traffic.

Visual preference surveys conducted by the planning firm of A. Nelessen Associates of Princeton, New Jersey, have also shown that people prefer communities with narrow streets. *[Editor's Note: See "Understanding & Making Use of People's Visual Preferences," by Nelessen & Constantine in Issue 9 of the Journal]*. And, of course, narrow streets are less costly to build. But the idea of wide streets, as outdated as it is, holds sway over people.

Let's identify our outdated ideas and discard them.

Look At The Bigger Picture

We need to step back for a second and look at the bigger picture. We need to recognize that development does and will happen. In fact, we build about one million homes in this country in an average year. Therefore, debating whether growth will occur is not a productive way to spend our time. Instead, we should be debating the pattern that this growth will take and the type of communities we will be building:

- Will development take the form of discrete towns and villages, or will it spill haphazardly over the landscape?
- Will we provide housing only for wealthy people, or will we provide housing opportunities for average working people?
- Will our communities accommodate only those who have the money and physical ability to own and operate a car, or will we create communities that provide mobility for our children, the elderly, and the poor?
- Will we share the costs of building schools and parks, or will new homebuyers be forced to pay the full bill?
- Will we make the hard choices about which natural environments should be preserved and which developed?

These are the questions we should be asking ourselves — not whether growth should occur.

If we can agree that development and change occur, we should be able to agree that preserving a "snapshot" view of the status quo is not the best type of planning or environmental preservation. Indeed, our vision should reach beyond what we see today.

The concept of "no net loss" in environmental matters places severe limits on our vision. An example of the "snapshot" approach is the recent proliferation of tree preservation laws that say that because a site starts out with 111 trees over 2-inch caliper, then we should end up after development with the same 111 trees over 2-inch caliper or some equivalent based on a mathematical formula. To be sure, developers are capable of a more creative response to the challenge of protecting resources and building in a more sensitive manner. But planners and public officials should not become bean counters. Let's look at the larger picture.

The task before today's builders and planners is to design and build something of greater societal value than the natural site that was lost to development. And developing true towns and neighborhoods and great places does just that. Developing scattered tracts and gobbling up land without building something that enhances our communities does not.

If planners cannot get as excited about creating a great place as they can about preserving a piece of land, they are probably in the wrong field. Similarly, developers who are not concerned with creating true neighborhoods and communities are probably in the wrong business.

Agree On How To Disagree Or How to Have Useful Discussions

Obviously, we will not agree on everything. But we must agree on how to disagree and how to engage in more productive discussions.

Let's agree to not use doomsday scenarios in defending our positions. Builders' and developers' doomsday scenarios tend to suggest that any new regulation will drive them out of business overnight and make it impossible for anyone to buy a new home. From the public sector, we often hear doomsday scenarios suggesting that unless a particular regulation is adopted, public safety will be at risk and someone will die as a result. For example, there's the "100-year party" scenario, which argues that because someday, someone will have a big party that attracts lots of cars, we must require four parking spaces per unit and a 40-foot wide street to allow for emergency vehicle access.

It is also imperative that we speak in clear language and define our terms more rigorously. Planning is characterized by a lot of vague terms, terms that lead to fuzzy thinking about what we are trying to accomplish. For example, the term "mixed use" is not useful. It does not tell us what the uses are, how the uses relate

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READER RESPONSE

The "Greenways" issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* [Issue 10, May/June 1993] was timely and informative. However, I was disappointed that no mention was made of the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program.

This program provides resource and planning expertise, working in partnership with public agencies and citizens to help develop new trails and greenways, convert abandoned railroads into multi-purpose trails, protect river access for public use, and protect and preserve other important natural resources near where people live. In 1993 this program is working with more than 130 conservation efforts across the country. For more information Journal readers can contact me c/o the Recreational Resources Assistance Division, NPS, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013.

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[Thomas Ross is also a member of the City of Fairfax, Virginia's Planning Commission. One example of this program's work was highlighted in "Sharing the Map: Public Involvement in Concept Planning" (Issue 6, p.6), describing the NPS-assisted planning effort in Bristol, Pennsylvania].

Editor's Note:

Among articles in progress for coming *Journal* issues are two for which we would particularly appreciate reader input. They deal respectively with how planning commissions and consultants can best work together; and how communities deal with noise. If you have any insights or examples, we'd appreciate hearing from you.

Also, let me re-extend an invitation to *Journal* readers to tell us about any noteworthy planning projects or activities in your community. And, lest I forget, our regular columnists — Elaine Cogan, Mike Chandler, and Greg Dale — welcome any feedback or questions you might have about any of their columns.

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to each other, or whether people will drive or walk from one use to another. "Mixed use" could apply to everything from Manhattan to Disney World.

Another term that is tossed around carelessly is "town center." A developer may call his strip shopping center a town center, but we should challenge that developer and say "that is not a town center." And then there is this year's popular term: "sustainable development." No one, including the new Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development, knows what that term means.

An Exciting Time In Planning & Development

It is clear that the planning profession is at an exciting and challenging crossroads. The past few years have witnessed a serious discussion about planning issues. We have learned from some of our mistakes, but we have also lost some knowledge we previously had about how to build good places.

Last year, public television aired a series about Christopher Columbus and his voyages. The series described how 15th century sailors in some ways knew *more* than we do today about the ocean, its currents, and how to sail. The same could be said for our knowledge of designing spaces. There seems to be some knowledge that, as a society, we used to have — as evidenced by the design of places like New England village greens or small Midwest farm towns — that has been lost somewhere along the way. And this is why there is such an interest in looking at models from the past.

The convergence of several ideas is forming a new paradigm to guide planning in the next decade:

- The rediscovery of traditional neighborhoods, as espoused by the leaders of the neotraditional development movement, is a powerful change that will strongly influence the pattern of future development.
- The realization that development must be compact if people are to walk places is merging with the recognition that sprawl wastes land and money — and contributes to traffic congestion and air pollution.
- The understanding that natural lands and open space can best be preserved by clustering development in areas more compatible with development.
- The reemergence of design as a central element of planning, and a renewed focus on the street as an important community space.

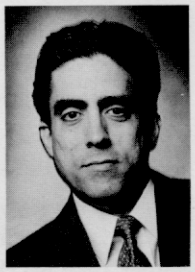
And why is planning and design important? Because it can help create better lives for people. We realize that physical form can affect how people relate to each other. Sound planning can enrich people's lives by, for example, making it unnecessary to spend two hours a day in a car commuting, allowing us to live closer to nature, or giving children the freedom to explore on their own rather than needing mom or dad to drive them everywhere.

We need to foster discussion of these issues. People need to be educated on planning issues — and it is our job to do it. Without a basic understanding of planning and development, the public often reacts to proposed projects viscerally.

Recently we have heard news that some communities, concerned that the houses built in new developments all "look the same," are passing "anti-monotony" ordinances to ensure more variety in the exterior appearance of new homes. At the same time, other communities are concerned that new development in existing neighborhoods (infill development) looks too different from existing development; they are passing ordinances to restrict infill development. So what we find are some communities that are upset because the new houses "all look alike," while other communities are upset because the new houses are "too different."

It is apparent that people are dissatisfied with aspects of new development, but they often cannot articulate their dislikes. Some understanding of planning and design might help citizens sort out what they want their community to be like and help them achieve their goals — without grasping for desperate measures such as "anti-monotony" ordinances.

As planning commissioners, you can help elevate the dialogue, and bring people along the path of learning so that they can develop a greater vision for our cities, towns, and suburbs. People need to know that their opinions count and that they can become knowledgeable about planning and development matters. If more of us can meet on common ground by agreeing on some basic visions and approaches, we will all do a better job of planning and building tomorrow's communities. ◆



Joseph R. Molinaro, AICP, is Director of Land Development Services for the National Association of Home Builders. Molinaro's article is based on remarks he made this summer as speaker at the Knoxville/Knox County, Tennessee, Metropolitan Planning Commission's annual "development awards program." Molinaro's previous article for the Journal, "Rethinking Residential Streets," appeared in Issue 1 (Nov./Dec. 1991).

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