

The Planning Process & the Parable of the Boiled Frog

by Mark D. Miles

The challenges that are facing many industries and professions today have given rise to the parable of the "boiled frog." If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately try to scramble out. But if you place a frog in room temperature water, and don't scare him, he'll stay put.

Now, if the pot sits on a heat source, and if you gradually turn up the temperature, something very interesting happens. As the temperature rises from 70 to 80 degrees, the frog will do nothing. In fact, he will show every sign of enjoying himself. As the temperature gradually increases, the frog will become groggier and groggier, until he is unable to climb out of the pot. Though there is nothing restraining him, the frog will sit there and boil. Why? Because the frog's internal apparatus for sensing threats to survival is geared to sudden changes in his environment, not to slow, gradual changes.

The frog in this story is frequently likened to the American automobile industry and its sluggish response to the heated impact of foreign competition. However, these lessons which have been directly adapted to private industry have clear application to the public sector as well. Like the frog in the parable, the process of intuitively planning for and facilitating growth has left many planning agencies relatively motionless while growth bubbles around them.

While no planning agency or municipality can have perfect foresight when it comes to predicting growth patterns, there are certainly means by which patterns of growth and development can be reasonably estimated. For example, an analysis of demographic and social trends can provide an educated basis for anticipating future needs. It is not the role of planning

commissioners and legislators to define the specific parameters of economic and market development, but it may be necessary to place stones in the river of growth to channel development into manageable segments.



I live in Gresham, a city with a population of about 70,000 located in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. In recent years, we have had several opportunities to realize that the water is heating around us, and that now is the opportunity to move while we still can.

Most recently, regional discussion and public debate has revolved around the development of a transportation corridor that will link an existing state highway and interstate freeway. At issue is not the need for such a corridor to facilitate the growing traffic volume, for that is recognized as a given. The primary concern is the location and design of the new traffic route and its related impact on existing residential and commercial development. With an eight-year development timeline, several of the proposed transportation corridor alternatives clearly had to be eliminated, for they would have offered a failing level of service when opened after the turn of the century.

In other instances, Gresham and its neighboring communities have been regionally mandated to actively plan for the future. This includes achieving long-term reductions in both per capita miles driven by the resident population and per capita parking spaces. As we try to visualize how our region will look and function years from now, innovation is clearly called for because the enlightened approaches of today will be the standards by which our society of tomorrow will be judged.

What lesson does the parable of the boiled frog hold? First and foremost, growth and change will happen and it is doing so on a daily basis. The temperature is rising. Those who are charged with planning can do so either proactively or reactively, with foresight or hindsight, anticipating changes that will impact the growth and development or dealing with the issues of growth after the fact. The challenge for all of us is to insightfully anticipate growth and adapt while we are still able to move.

Mark D. Miles is a planning commissioner in Gresham, Oregon. Mark notes that, "as planning commissioners we frequently find ourselves challenged by a variety of 'what if' questions; unlike most elected officials, we are charged with having the foresight to envision our city 30, 40 and 50 years into the future." The frog illustration was prepared by Chris Carigg.

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