

Challenges and Opportunities

by Bruce W. McClendon

Probably at no time in our history have we experienced social, political and economic changes occurring as rapidly as today. We are being asked, both practitioners and planning officials, to do more in our communities — better, faster, more efficiently and with fewer resources. In this environment we must learn to do a better job of seeing the future and positioning ourselves to be masters, rather than victims, of change.

To help you anticipate and prepare for change, I would like to offer the following observations about five of the most important national trends and patterns that I believe will present both challenges and opportunities for planners and public officials in the coming years:

1. *There is a limit on what government can do.* The public is becoming increasingly disillusioned about the failures of government at all levels to render quality, basic services at a reasonable cost. People are unwilling to pay more taxes to support bureaucrats and elected officials who are unresponsive and out of touch with them. Citizens want more access and involvement in the decision-making process, and they want accountability at all levels of government. Citizens are interested in helping to develop and deliver better products and services, and they increasingly support the privatization of public services. They want economy, efficiency and most importantly of all, results.

2. *The largest employer in this country is the non-profit sector.* It is estimated that one out of every two adult Americans works as a volunteer — most in addition to holding paying jobs. As much as 15 percent of the gross national product is accounted for by unpaid work for non-profit organizations. Such organizations are able to get more results out of the same resources than either the public or the private sector. Interest in volunteerism continues to grow

and it is one of the positive trends we need to capitalize on. Increasingly, it is being recognized that the most effective planning is taking place outside city hall or the county offices and is being done by non-professionals. Planners need to focus on participatory planning that fosters pride and ownership, self-responsibility and empowerment. As recently suggested by Henry Cisneros, "Planners must plan more 'for and with people' and less for projects."

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3. *The public is becoming more knowledgeable and more sophisticated.* Users of products and services are becoming more demanding, and more value conscious. The public sector needs to do a better job of identifying markets, developing specified products and services, and becoming more efficient and more effective at delivering results. A skilled population is the most valuable resource a community can have in our post-industrial economy. Planners need to contribute to the community's knowledge base and promote the development of "human capital."

4. *The migration from central cities has gone beyond flight to the suburbs and is being manifested in the form of "edge cities."* Jobs and amenities are moving with people to their homes on the edge of urban development. The secret to the "edge cities" success is their reliance on market forces. City planners must do a better job of creating

environments that people want to live and work in. Planners cannot impose their values on the people they are trying to serve. Unless we can create an environment in our central cities that has many of the characteristics found in "edge cities" — and successfully promote the values and benefits of multi-cultural inclusiveness — we will doom our older cities to stagnation and decay.

5. *There's a widening gap between the haves and have nots.* In the critically important areas of income, housing, education, health care, public safety and access to power, we are creating two different levels of existence. Fundamental questions are raised about the viability of this situation and the sustainability of any true sense of community if this imbalance continues. The most difficult challenge facing all of us is how to use the four previously mentioned trends to help reverse this last trend. It must be done if we are really committed to competing in a global economy and to preserving a country that is truly a land of opportunity.

Planners must take a major role in explaining why the private sector has a real stake in social equity, social stability and bringing all players to the table. Collaboration and coalition building will make it possible to peacefully resolve conflicts. As Lincoln said so eloquently so many years ago, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." ♦

Bruce McClendon is the Director of the Planning and Development Division of Orange County, Florida and author of *Mastering Change and Customer Service in Local Government*, both published by the American Planning Association.

