


The Nature of Planning

by Michael Chandler

It is probably safe to assume that most planning commissioners relish the challenges incumbent with their office. Zeal, vigor, and tenacity are adjectives I use to describe the performance of planning commissioners I have observed in Virginia and elsewhere.

Commitment to task and a willingness to work hard are admirable traits; however, they will be of little value if a planning commission fails to understand or grasp the larger context within which it operates.

Viewed in isolation, what does the term planning mean to you? I like to start my planning commission training sessions with this very question because it is so fundamental — and because responses to it say much about the training participants, their experience and their perspective.  *What Does Planning Mean to You, p. 9*

Planning can be thought of as a forward-thinking or anticipatory process. As people, we readily accept this view of planning. We plan our careers. We plan vacations. We plan parties. We plan for our families and we plan, to the best of our ability, for emergencies and unexpected events.

In the work-a-day world we also plan. Organizations are continually looking for ways to capitalize on their strengths, while minimizing their weaknesses. Business organizations are endeavoring to stay close to the customer by being responsive and cost effective. As in our personal lives, organizations rely on planning to shape and mold the future. In short, planning is what people and organizations rely on to get from where they are to where they want to be.

Public sector land use planning is no different. Through the practice of community planning, localities decide how land — which is a finite, nonrenewable resource — will be utilized both for today and tomorrow. In many respects, planning has become the means to an end. Planning, in the 90's, is being recognized as the process capable

of moving a community from today's reality to tomorrow's possibilities.

In addition to defining planning, members of a planning commission must also be in a position to explain why planning is important. Let me list ten reasons that seem particularly relevant:

1. *Prepare for the Future.* A fundamental reason for planning is preparing for the future. In the last issue of the *Journal*, I closed my column by paraphrasing William Jennings Bryan who viewed the future as a thing to be *invented*, not something to be wished for. Properly done, planning can help us create our community's tomorrow — today.

2. *Accommodate the Present.* Planning is not just for tomorrow; it is also for today. Solid comprehensive planning will empower a community with the capacity to make day-to-day decisions, in addition to future ones.

3. *Anticipate Change.* Change is a fact of life. How we choose to react to community change says much about us. Planning is a process communities can use to anticipate and positively shape the change they will inevitably experience.

4. *Maximize Community Strengths.* All communities possess certain assets. Planning is a process communities can use to inventory their positive attributes, as well as articulate a strategy for building on them.

5. *Minimize Community Weaknesses.* In like fashion, all communities have certain weaknesses or deficiencies. Comprehensive planning can help a community position itself to minimize or overcome identified weaknesses.

6. *Respond to the Legislative Charge.* Another reason for planning is simply that most states require localities to plan. Accordingly, it is important that each commission be cognizant of any and all state mandates governing the local planning process.

7. *Secure a Sense of Community Coordination.* Planning provides a community with

the ability to put the right places in the right place. Taking time to plan your community's land use pattern will contribute to your community's liveability.

8. *Deal with a Scarce Resource.* As noted earlier, land is a finite, nonrenewable resource that is generally scarce. We must take care when we plan how our land resource will be developed and at what intensity development will occur.

9. *Build a Sense of Community.* The community planning process, especially if citizens are encouraged to participate, will help build a sense of community. Citizens involved in government develop a sense of ownership and responsibility.

10. *Provide for the Public Health, Safety and Welfare.* The police power provision underpinning local government is a final reason localities are engaged in community planning. This legal premise is fundamental

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and helps leverage planning as a legitimate and legally binding practice.

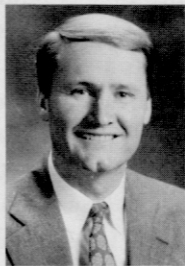
WHAT DOES PLANNING MEAN TO YOU?

Over the years that I've been training local planning commissioners, I've asked the above question hundreds of times. Let me give you a sampling of the responses I've received:

- Planning means deciding how land will be used and for what purpose.
- Planning is an intelligent way to prepare for the inevitable.
- Planning is what we don't do enough of.
- Planning is government trying to tell people what they can do with their land, which is wrong.
- Planning means making choices.
- Planning is what you do to keep someone from telling you what to do.
- Planning is what people do to shape the future.
- Planning is an imperfect process communities use to get ready for the unknown.
- Planning is a waste of time without fiscal and political commitments.
- Planning is our best hope for making tomorrow better than today.
- Planning is thinking before doing.

It is important for planning commissions to realize that communities must study future needs to better manage the present — and study the present to better care for the future. Anything less should be considered unacceptable.

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike also regularly conducts planning commissioner training programs, and sponsors the Virginia



Certified Planning Commissioner Program. He has served on the Blacksburg Planning Commission, and currently is a member of the Town Council and Vice-Mayor.