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The Planning Process and People

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Introduction

Planning takes place on many levels, ranging from the individual to the nation and beyond. It can be related to a tremendous variety of situations and time spans, so there is no reason to expect the planning process to be uniform in its application.

The particular elements of planning, the structures and techniques used, and the degrees of complexity will vary widely, depending on the conditions, issues and units of concern. About the only elements common to any planning are the assumptions that what happens today has consequences in the future, and that people can do things in the present that will increase the probabilities of particular events and situations matching their expectations or aspirations in the future.

In other words, the planning process is predicated on the notions that the present is the father of the future, and people can purposely intervene to give some direction to the flow of events.

Community planning

Purposeful planning is supposedly as effective at the community level as at the level of the individual, family or firm. However, community planning involves many more implications because of the diversity of values, aspirations and concerns in communities. It is not self-evident what should be worked on and for in a community. Even determining the focus of community planning requires more searching, inquiry and testing.

Because people within a community have different ideas about what difficulties should be addressed and the desirable objectives, certain persons often work at cross purposes. This is not bad in itself. In fact, it can be quite constructive if it leads to interchanges, explorations and an understanding of the diversity within a community.

Since communities are complex, an effective community planning process must reflect this complexity. The planning process will have controversial content, and the process itself may be a center of controversy.

The planning process can focus on many aspects of a community. There is no logical necessity that it be based on land use. The planning process could evolve from social, cultural, economic or political concerns as easily as from land use questions. The history of community planning, not the nature of the process, has been responsible for the emphasis on land use.

Land use and land use regulation issues did not develop recently. The questions of land use have been with American communities all along. Violent range wars between cattle producers and sodbusters, in which guns and barbed wire were the tools of land use control, illustrate that these conflicts over property rights, freedoms and land use are nothing new.

From the 1920s until the last decade, community planning was handicapped by the formalized model ordinance or model-law pattern. Many progressives and professionals of the past generation thought there was a single right and ready pattern for community planning and promoted this singularly narrow model. Their prime method was to get legislation that was in accordance with their design for proper and technically competent planning. All over the U.S., states, counties and cities adopted model enabling laws or model ordinances as a basis for organizing planning commissions in specified ways.

Out of this movement came an approach to planning that focused on regulation of land use. One feature of this approach was zoning, a legal tool for local governments to vary permissible land uses according to districts established within their jurisdiction. The intent of the progressives and planners was to provide zoning as just one tool within the planning kit.

While professionals stress planning as much more than zoning, the words "planning" and "zoning" are often interpreted synonymously. The lack of differentiating these terms has brought confusion to many communities. Historically, the public has not seen much of what went on within a planning establishment until the proposal for zoning surfaced, because the planners have been inclined to close planning processes to the public. Certainly citizen apathy has been responsible for part of this dilemma. But, the advocates of planning have felt, too often, that the business of planning was something to be restricted to professionals. This history of local planning development left the public and much of the press with an impression that zoning is the only significant feature of community planning.

When the distinction between planning and zoning has been reasonably defined within a community, it is easier to turn public attention to the building of effective planning processes.

The process

The planning process, as related to communities, is a continuous process of searching, testing, learning and developing actions. It must begin and proceed in the context of the time, the setting and the needs, and considering what is known, what is not known and what can be learned. This process cannot be carried out through simple, routine operations and tasks.

The purpose of planning is to do a better job in bringing about or preserving desirable situations. It therefore is a practical business. The objective of community planning is not to devise a grand picture of an ideal community, but to help make what lies ahead more satisfying for people living in the community.

A major part of a community's planning needs to be "comprehensive planning." The idea of "comprehensive planning" recognizes that various aspects of community life interconnect, that economics, values, physical arrangements and social structures are all woven through the fabric of the community. Planners must understand the tapestry of the whole community to be able to anticipate the consequences of actions in any one area.

Comprehensive planning, however, does not require that everything be taken into account at all times. It does mean that when any one element is under consideration, it is thought about and investigated in the context of the whole community. Although planning may focus on a particular part of community conditions, it is recognized that, in real life, actions in one area are not detached from the others.

Land use is a perfect example of a specific element that is intimately tied to the community as a whole. Land use considerations range from taxation to love of the wilderness, from birth rates to national defense. With these mutual relationships between land use and so many other parts of the community, prudent land use planning must be formulated with a comprehensive approach.

The planning process, since it must be influenced by experience and learning, cannot be pre-designed. Planning must be responsive to new conditions, new information and events. Effective planning is dependent on constant searching and the capability to react to what is discovered and what is decided.

Whether planning starts with a concern about land use or some other aspect of the community, the first step is to begin building a multi-dimensional picture of the community and to track the relationships within it. The general picture of the community is never complete, because things change and are discovered. The elaboration and adjustment of information continues all through the process. There is a point at which this first stage of planning provides a reasonable picture which, though incomplete, is enough to work with.

The second stage is to learn the particular areas of concern, problems or aspirations prominent in the community. These are determined through what is known, at this point, about the community as a whole unit.

The third stage involves establishing processes related to the various interests that have been determined. Considerable attention should be given to developing means of monitoring and feedback.

From then on the process involves getting information, developing courses of action, interpreting feedback and adjusting the process via this added intelligence and experience. The basic pattern of the planning process — search, action, response and adjustment — is then established. Planning is a learning, acting, learning cycle. To take advantage of the energies, intelligence, experience, talents and information within a community, planning must be an open process allowing transactions to flow between the planners and the community.

The process and the public

One of the greatest weaknesses of traditional planning has been the tendency to restrict significant involvement to the pre-selected participants. However, for a realistic picture of the community, it is necessary to cultivate many perspectives from the community. Further, to get the most out of monitoring and feedback, it is necessary to use information from sources throughout the community system. Citizen participation is essential to the learning cycle.

Citizen participation is a complicated and dynamic phenomenon, just as is the planning process. There is plenty of indication that effective citizen involvement in planning is possible. However, it does not often happen by accident, and the planning process has to be designed and redesigned to accommodate it. An important consideration in establishing the planning process revolves around providing for citizen involvement. How planning gets its start seems to have a great deal to do with whether citizen participation develops sufficiently to perform its functions with the planning system.

Educational experiences

MU Extension personnel have worked educationally with Missouri communities and counties on the subject of planning from the middle 1950s to the present time.

From the middle 1950s through the early 1960s, citizens became interested in planning as a response to some local problem or concern. Many contacted their local MU Extension centers for assistance in developing ways to cope with these concerns.

For example, rural people asked what could be done about towns in other counties that located trash dumps in their rural neighborhood. Some of these people thought planning and zoning might be useful for preventing this kind of situation. People living around the large urban areas became concerned about haphazard development patterns in their neighborhoods. Other groups, while promoting industrial development in their communities, discovered that industries often wanted to locate in an area zoned for industry. For these reasons, they too wanted to learn more about planning and zoning.

People in three counties in Northeast Missouri were concerned about what would happen to their communities when the Cannon Dam and Reservoir was constructed. It was predicted that the project would generate large numbers of people coming into the area for recreation, to establish vacation homes, to start new businesses and industry. Local citizens wondered what changes these developments would bring to their communities and rural neighborhoods and looked for ways to get some control over these developments.

Planning seemed to offer a mechanism through which local people could participate in guiding the changes that would be taking place. MU Extension was asked to organize educational programs on planning and zoning in the three counties. The objective was to educate the public on the "pros" and "cons" of county planning and zoning so that they could make an informed decision if and when the matter was brought to a vote. After an extensive educational program, carried out over a period of one year, the citizens of the three counties voted to undertake planning and zoning programs.

The three-county experience is an example of interest in planning being generated in response to locally recognized problems or needs. Through the educational program, many people learned that planning could be a useful and practical activity. People learned that planning could help them solve some existing problems and prevent or mitigate problems they anticipated in the future.

In the late 1960s, the advent of a planning requirement in many federal grant and aid programs provided a new push for initiating planning programs. In many cases, local citizens, who had not previously investigated planning as a possible tool for solving a recognized problem or concern, were encouraged to adopt planning merely to meet these requirements for a particular federal grant or aid program.

In a number of cases, due to the press of time in making application for the federal programs, efforts were made to vote on county planning without providing an adequate educational program on the concepts of planning and its relevance to local problems or concerns. More often than not in these cases, planning was defeated.

In other cases, municipalities or counties, which were already authorized to plan, introduced planning programs merely to produce a document that would meet the requirements of federal programs, again without involving local people or the planning commission.

In these kinds of situations — where planning was undertaken hastily to meet the planning requirements for a grant or aid program — the resulting planning programs were usually less than satisfactory.

The people of the community must understand the concepts of planning and how the process can be productively applied to community concerns or they will not support a planning program. Without citizen participation and support, any plans developed will stand little chance of implementation.

A sound educational program on the concepts of planning and its application to the community take time and effort but can make the final difference between success and failure.

Through study and discussion, citizens can learn that planning can provide a mechanism through which they can give some direction to the flow of events. Citizens can learn that through their participation purposeful planning can effectively help determine the future at the county or community level.

Related MU Extension publications

- DM490, Working With Resource People
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