

Local Organization for Transportation Planning

T. W. SCHULENBERG, Executive Director,
Indiana Department of Commerce

Transportation planning obviously pays dividends. It doesn't cost to plan, it pays! You have heard that phrase frequently—but do we have the proof?

A few years ago when the Tri-State Expressway was being planned in the Calumet area, several subdividers were at the same time busy planning several construction jobs in the same area. Unable to ascertain the route of the expressway, they proceeded with their new home construction projects and within a year after the houses were finished 70 of them had to be condemned. It cost more than a million dollars worth of damages for right-of-way that could have been reserved by earlier announcement of the expressway route. Planning would have paid off in this instance. It certainly cost not to plan, in this case.

A few years later in another county in the state the county commissioners became aware of a serious problem brought about by a combination of bad weather and poor planning. They found that about three miles of their new streets were in need of reconstruction. They had accepted the streets after the subdividers had moved to new hunting grounds. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars later they saw the advantages of subdivision regulations, minimum street specifications, and good administration of those plans. They learned the value of planning, after they had received a practical demonstration that it costs not to plan.

Fortunately, a planned approach has been undertaken to community problems of the types cited previously by most cities in the state of Indiana. Most community leaders are now well acquainted with planning procedures and planning programs. In fact, in the state of Indiana there are now over 250 local planning commissions. All the cities, except ten of the fifth class cities, thirty-five of the counties, and over 100 of the incorporated towns have planning programs established. Almost all of them have some form of comprehensive plan—how well these plans are being administered would be the subject of another

discussion—but in almost every case these communities have a zoning ordinance, a subdivision ordinance, and a *thoroughfare plan* as the basic ingredients of their comprehensive plan.

A number of metropolitan areas are now approaching their planning problems from the cooperative vantage point. Marion County and Indianapolis have a metropolitan planning organization. Tippecanoe County, Vanderburgh County, and Ohio County are the other metropolitan, or area, operations, while Howard County and Elkhart County have another form of cooperative planning in evidence. Theirs is a joint planning commission staff, serving the several planning commissions organized within the county.

There are, of course, several areas in which the regional planning approach could be used to an advantage. The most evident of these is the Lake-Porter County area, where a complex overlapping of jurisdictions and developments can be properly approached only from a regional or metropolitan point of view. Progress is being made in this direction—but it appears that several more years will pass before such an organization can be effected there.

In all these jurisdictions mentioned, there is planning in evidence. If the plans are related to future development needs of the community, government officials are often apprehensive about the investment in a future that cannot be reduced to a tangible diagram. After the plans have been prepared, they are often uncertain how those plans are to serve them.

Situations experienced in Marion County during the past several years have enhanced neither the planner's nor the highway official's reputations. It is hoped that everyone has learned from experience that solutions can be found by working together. The state's thoroughfare plans for the interstate system and the city's plan resembled each other only in coincidental respects. Both were inclined to cooperate—but the basic definition of cooperation differed with the point of view of the subject. One definition, for example, goes like this, "Sure, we will cooperate! As soon as we finish the plans we will tell the city what they are." The other definition—"We don't like your plans, do them over again—or bring them in line with ours—we will have ours ready in a week." A four-year stalemate does not make for progress—needless to say, the confidence of the public was rather shaken as a result of the unnecessary exchange of words and ruffled feelings that resulted.

Thoroughfare planning in a large metropolitan area is a considerably more involved process than thoroughfare planning in a county seat city of 5,000 population.

Those cities large enough to be able to afford both a planning staff and a traffic engineering staff seldom have problems in developing very effective thoroughfare plans. There is no problem in obtaining the services of sufficient technicians to provide the basic data for the planning job. Street-use surveys, O. D. and land-use surveys, traffic service analysis, transit service analysis, inventories of the physical system, and financial capabilities of the local government are among the studies considered essential to getting the plan underway.

In the development of the plan, as in any other segment of the community plan, it is necessary to establish and maintain the interest of the elected officials, the executive head, professional people, associated departments, and lay leaders. Lay participation is essential—but should be used advisedly—at the right place and at the right time. But within the official family, associates must be kept working together at all times and in all places. Planning programs tend to be good or bad as local governments have been good or bad—and the citizens usually get what they deserve.

As the planning work develops, those phases that do not make too dull reading should be brought before the public through the press, through the newsletters of civic organizations, through neighborhood newspapers, or such other media as might be available.

If the public is kept informed at this stage of the planning process, prior to the time when the proposal is authorized for construction, it allows time for the exploration of alternatives in the case of opposition and for convincing the opposition of the larger community interest, if the original plan remains as that most feasible.

Of course, there will always be that inevitable element who maintain, "It isn't needed! Put it somewhere else! We don't want it!"

Following—or rather, accompanying, the development of the transportation plan is the implementation phase—the financing, capital budgeting, the priority selection, and finally the construction. Here again, every segment of local government must be incorporated into the planning process.

Somewhere down the scale from the large metropolitan areas—we have the smaller communities who have their own problems in planning operations. These communities may prefer their planning in small, palatable packages; they often feel that they "cannot afford" full-time planning and engineering staff. Here is the area in which frustrations are most evident. Ambitions usually surpass realities; but, even in these communities, planning is an absolute necessity.

The thoroughfare plan is normally an important part of the comprehensive plan developed even by the smallest "planned" town or the most rural county.

Since the job must be done, consultants are usually retained to provide the local guidance needed. Fortunately, most consulting firms working in Indiana have availed themselves of information available from the State Highway Department, from Highway Extension, and from other sources. Many planning firms have staff engineers who have acquired a great amount of experience in specialized phases of transportation planning.

With the coming of the Interstate Highway System, there is awareness of the relationship between state and local planning efforts. Major thoroughfares and limited-access routes can stimulate community growth—or they can strangle the community. It is the community's responsibility to look out for its own interests and to "sound off" when poor locations have been selected.

New highways can open up new land for industrial or commercial development—these locations must be considered while the planning process is running its course. The land-use and thoroughfare plans must be developed—each in relation to the other.

Neighborhood units, school districts, local street systems, drainage, recreation, flood control, as well as safety, efficient design, and engineering principals should all be considered, each in its own perspective.

Consider, for example, the alternative of an expressway route through a modern housing development—one through a slum area that has been a community eyesore for several decades. Of course, these alternatives should be considered in relation to the overall plan—but, who knows, perhaps the latter route might be justified from several points-of-view.

The problems of the small community, even though they may be in many respects different from the large city, are certainly worthy of as much consideration and careful planning as those of the metropolitan areas. Among them may be cited (1) segregation of through and local traffic; (2) elimination of traffic bottlenecks and hazardous intersections; (3) shortage of parking space; (4) methods of control in fringe development; (5) financial embarrassment due to extraordinary growth; and (6) coordination of services and timing of capital works programming to coordinate development.

During the planning stage it is quite difficult, for example, to make an accurate determination of the economic base of the smaller community or to make any logical forecast of the future population of the community. Fluctuations in the regional economy, for example, might show up in the small community in an unusual population growth—or even a terrific loss of population.

Who, for example, could have predicted ten years ago the sudden mushrooming growth of Portage, in northwestern Indiana; or, is there anyone who can predict with accuracy the population of that town 20 years from now? (This, by the way, is one of the most interesting transportation planning jobs in the country. The expansion was about in the first place by the proposed harbor development, which in turn will require a major network of railroads servicing it and the industries locating in the immediate area. Add to this the highway network necessary to transport the workers to and from the industrial giants to be located in a very small area, an airport which is being considered as a part of the complex, and, of course, the human element adding considerably to the confusion of this area—and the land speculation, building, and other problems of a boom-town are inevitable. This should be an interesting demonstration of planning and development.)

Thoroughfare planning, some people say, is too important to be left to planners. Other people say that engineers shouldn't be trusted with planning of any type because they have too many rules to follow—such as the one that says a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, or the one that says—water flows downhill—so build on the level.

Neither of these extremes is valid. We need both engineers and planners on such important planning considerations as have been discussed.

The biggest mistakes that planners have made in thoroughfare planning are those where an engineer might have been of considerable help—and there are many instances in which the engineers could have had the help of planners, too.

The development of a transportation plan calls for a lot of teamwork. It demands Cooperation with a big "C."