ZONING FOR LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENTS

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We have a serious "time lag" in planning and zoning. We have known for many years that as much as 85 percent of all new building in our cities is taking place through development of large projects, i.e., projects including a number of buildings related to each other but frequently of different type and character, and occupying areas of 10 acres or more. We have not recognized this situation. In large part, we continue to plan and zone for the building practices of 30 to 40 years ago when cities were built building-by-building and lot-by-lot. Our zoning practice is extremely slow to adjust to this changed condition.

We have a second difficulty also and that is that in much of the building and rebuilding of our cities through these large projects we have come to confuse size with quality. Generally speaking, the professional city planners and planning commissions and the more sophisticated parts of the public such as the daily press and the slick-paper architectural magazines, are more than willing to praise any project just so long as it is big enough. If we, however, accept anything that is big just because it is big, we will be quite likely to do our communities an extreme disservice. Several cities are now paying the price of such actions and at least one fairly well-known book has received quite a little public attention by pointing out this very problem.

Surely our planning and zoning practice must have advanced to a stage where it may establish reasonable and sensible criteria that will determine the form and the pattern of the urban community.
Inadequate as we may be to meet the challenge still it should be the planner and not the land speculator who determines the form and arrangement of the city. In this connection, it is easy to identify the communities that have given up and turned the task over to the speculator. They are those that include a "floating zone" in their zoning ordinance.

Proposed Zoning Policy for Large Projects

Becoming disturbed about this general situation in our office we prepared a study of zoning for large-scale projects. This was published by the Urban Land Institute as Technical Bulletin No. 42, "Density Zoning - Organic Zoning for Planned Residential Developments". In essence, this document comes to several quite simple and fundamental conclusions.

The first conclusion is that there may be no sound approach to this problem unless a community has a comprehensive plan covering the entire area of urbanization, which provides a realistic and forward-looking design for the urban environment as a whole. Accompanying such a plan must be comprehensive zoning regulations based on the plan setting aside specific areas for commerce and industry and providing realistic density requirements for the residential segments of the community.

It seems redundant to have to always emphasize the need for a comprehensive plan and for basing zoning on such a plan. Yet, by and large, our cities are a long ways from achieving this elementary objective, particularly insofar as applying controls and direction to the entire area of urbanization. Very few cities are satisfactorily and effectively doing this and most of these are relatively small in population.

However, once these two essential elements are available (and without them no satisfactory public policy is available for large-scale projects or anything else), then it is possible to institute relatively simple measures for the regulation of large-scale projects. The essence of our proposal in Technical Bulletin No. 42 was that the entire large-scale project be considered a "permitted use" and be treated as such. Once this is done then the problem of an intermixture of residential types, provision of open space, introduction of accessory shopping and commercial areas, etc. is all solved conceptually. It is necessary in doing this to provide for a review and approval of the plan for the project. I believe that there should also be a reasonable requirement for eventual completion of the project by the promoter. It is absolutely essential that the number of dwelling units allowed on a particular project be limited by the over-all ordinance. It is also essential that there be a reasonable control over the total amount of land devoted to such accessory uses as shopping centers and other commercial activities.
There is nothing very much new in what is proposed here. For example, in the St. Louis County, Missouri zoning ordinance, which was enacted in 1946, a provision quite similar to this was included. Others can be found dating back to the 1930's. In the Hamilton County, Ohio ordinance, enacted in 1949, there was a similar provision which also provided a limited amount of commercial accessory uses stating that "one area not to exceed one acre for each 100 lots... may be included in such plan as a shopping center....". The St. Louis County provision was used only four times in subdivisions accommodating 1,000 dwelling units while during the same period 100,000 dwelling units were built in conventional subdivisions. Up until a few months ago the Hamilton County provision had not been used at all.

Last year a new Comprehensive Plan for Hamilton County, Ohio was drafted. This plan recognized the problems inherent in the extremely rough topography of the County and proposed that many of these problems be solved through use of the "Community Unit" provision. The accompanying illustration is taken from this report and indicates how an intermixture of dwelling types and provision of open space could be provided by utilization of the Community Unit provision and not increasing the resulting density of population over that allowed by conventional zoning. Publicity attendant upon the new Master Plan and meetings with local home builders have now evoked four large projects to be developed under the Community Unit Plan in just a few months. These are shown in the accompanying illustrations. While I am sure that all of us might disagree in one detail or another in connection with each of the designs, I am also sure that all of us would agree that they all represent an advance over the typical, conventional, single-family subdivision. The flexibility inherent in the Community Unit Plan approach can bring about better neighborhood design, more amenities, better relation to topography and economies to the builder.

Through provisions such as those included in the Hamilton County ordinance or in the St. Louis County ordinance we know that we can do an effective job in the regulation of large-scale projects. Further, the zoning provisions required need not be long or complicated; the shorter and simpler that they are the better. A sample text may be found in Technical Bulletin No. 42.

Problems in the Zoning of Large-Scale Projects

There are three basic problems inherent in this solution to the zoning of large-scale projects:

1. Public Acceptance

Zoning controls have been widely criticized by the home building industry as hampering any imaginative treatment of residential areas. This simply is not so. Zoning practice is way ahead of the home builders. The major obstacle to public acceptance of many of the features found in the typical large-scale residential project has been the almost unbelievably atrocious designs found when most home builders come to develop multiple dwellings or row houses; in fact, anything but the single-family home.
For example, in one of the better suburbs in St. Louis a few years ago major portions of a heavily traveled thoroughfare were rezoned from commercial use to multiple dwelling use. Everyone thought that a step forward had been taken as strip-type commercial use on this street had been precluded. Now that it is almost all built up with apartments we are beginning to wonder if the right thing was done. When you look at the pictures of the results you begin to think that even a strip-type commercial development might have been better.

While the examples from St. Louis are certainly bad enough they are not nearly as bad as some of the multiple dwelling units that are starting to crop up in the Chicago suburbs.

So long as builders are undertaking designs of such poor quality we cannot be surprised when the community rises in wrath at any proposal that we intermix dwelling types in a neighborhood design or introduce multiple dwellings into a single-family residential area. The fact of this matter is that with the single-family dwelling on a large lot the community knows where it is. When the bars are let down and something else is permitted, then we all too often end up with a development of very poor quality. The public reaction is intelligent and sound. This situation is the builder's and not the planner's fault.

The fact of this matter is that we cannot do a satisfactory job of regulating large-scale projects and develop neighborhoods with interesting arrangements of dwelling units until we begin to do a better design job and be able to show to the public on the ground an improved type of residential neighborhood. Many of the home builders do not employ adequate design talent. Many, if not most, architects and certainly almost all civil engineers cannot do a passable job on even the most elementary type of site planning. Somehow or other we are going to have to force these people into doing a better design and development job; otherwise, our communities are going to continue to consist of square mile after square mile of single-family subdivisions.

I don't believe that we are yet ready to accept public design of all new construction of the residential areas of our cities; nor do I believe this is essential in order to obtain good design. However, without satisfactory design it is going to be impossible to gain public acceptance of any forward-looking measures of zoning control for large-scale projects.

2. Open Space

Almost all of the advanced designs for new subdivisions and new large-scale residential projects involve provision of common open space, sometimes in rather large amounts. Unfortunately,
much new residential construction takes place in unincorporated areas where public agencies are unable or unwilling to accept responsibility for the open space. Many home builders have contended that density control of such large projects was impractical because no one would take care of the open space provided. These problems can be overcome. First of all, most open space in large-scale projects need not be intensively developed and highly maintained unless there is a high density of population that justifies an ornamental treatment of very limited amount of open space. Much open space can be left in its natural condition and have very little, if any, maintenance cost and yet contribute immeasurably to the amenities of the project.

Hamilton County has developed a standard form of trusteeship that appears to very successfully overcome this problem in areas where public ownership and maintenance cannot be possible. Similar systems have been in use in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area for many generations. Care and treatment of the open space is not an insurmountable problem.

3. Assembly of Land

In the environs of many of our larger metropolitan areas land ownership has been cut up into so many small parcels as to make any type of good neighborhood design virtually impossible. This is an extraordinarily serious problem that receives very little attention at any planning meeting. It has been solved in just a few instances such as in the British Columbia Compulsory Replatting Act. However, this type of land assembly may be more important to the future of many of our communities than urban renewal and an equivalent amount of time should be given to solving it through legislation and new procedures.

Summary

Satisfactory zoning of large-scale projects is going to require much more time on the part of our planning staffs. And we are going to have to have much more capable planning staffs with ability in the design field. It requires much more time to properly review designs of the type, for example, that have been presented in Hamilton County than is the case with a conventional subdivision. If the builders would do a better job of project design this would help but I'm afraid we can't count on this.

Needed also is more research on what people want in neighborhood design and not what they do when they come to live in some of these newly designed projects. Certain of the things which we as planners might suggest may have very limited appeal to the people occupying a project. They may have other needs that could have been supplied, yet were not because they were not known. Here again, a long trial-and-error process is involved. We should spend more time, however, finding out what people do with a project after it is built than we do in designing the project in the first instance, and in this connection it may be truthfully said that we are doing less than half a job in satisfactory community design.

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