PLANNING AS A CHALLENGE TO SMALL TOWNS

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By Eldridge Lovelace*

"Planning as a challenge to small towns" implies a conflict of some kind between planning and the small town. One way to approach this problem would be (1) to define what is meant by planning, (2) to analyze the characteristics of the small town, and (3) to investigate the reasons why one poses a challenge to the other.

What Is Planning?

Planning is often described as a typical human activity. We plan our homes before they are built. Industries plan their future operations. The exercise of some degree of foresight is found in most human activities.

The organization of people, buildings, transportation facilities, utilities, and other facilities that we call a town or a city represents one of the most complex facets of our civilization. We know that the many diverse interrelationships between people and facilities found in a city are extraordinarily complicated. The exercise of the maximum degree of foresight in the development of our towns and cities surely is fully justified. The lives of the majority of our citizens are intimately affected by the character of these communities.

From sad experience we know the tremendous human and economic waste that has resulted and is still resulting from not planning our towns and cities. The blighted areas, the slums, the hodgepodge of land uses, the traffic congestion, the lack of parking spaces, the lack of even minimum standards of school, park, and recreational facilities, all testify to the need for the exercise of foresight — for planning. We are finding past mistakes difficult and expensive to correct. Certainly our first step should be to stop making the same mistakes all over again today.

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The city planning movement in this country quite naturally originated in the larger and older cities in the East. It resulted from earnest endeavors to find ways and means of correcting the miserable living and working conditions resulting from the rapid, unplanned urbanization of the country during the latter part of the last century. City planning has had a rapid growth, and it is still growing. Planning procedures and techniques are constantly being improved. City planning is becoming an accepted municipal activity, fully accepted by our larger cities and gradually used more and more in the smaller cities and towns.

The City Plan

The basic idea of city planning is to coordinate the normal development and redevelopment of a city into some type of a coherent scheme. This scheme is commonly known as the city plan. You cannot do city planning without a city plan. You must have this coordinated scheme before planning can begin. This is an elemental truth that is often overlooked.

Most city plans consist of three basic parts. The first is a study of the economic basis of the community — why it has grown in the past, sources of employment factors that will influence future growth — together with estimates of future population and plans indicating the most desirable distribution and density of population on the ground. The second part consists of measures to coordinate private land development with a city plan. Zoning is the most important of these. The third and final part consists of plans for such important physical parts of the city as streets, schools, parks, water distribution, sewers, public buildings, etc.

This city plan must be developed in con-
siderable detail with enough information so that the builder of an individual building or the director of an individual city department will know precisely what he must do to conform to the plan. Broad pictorial schemes of the "city of tomorrow" type, while an important part of the planning process perhaps, are not the desired result. To be of real value, the plan must be sufficiently detailed for actual application on the ground.

No individual or group of individuals can foresee all the events of the future that are to shape the size and character of a city. Any city plan must constantly be studied, revised, and kept up to date in conformity with current trends.

There is nothing mysterious or overly technical about a city plan. A good city plan should be nothing more or less than a common-sense scheme showing the basic arrangement of the city as it can and should be in the future.

Carrying Out the Plan

A great number of techniques have been developed for carrying out a city plan. While all these may not be found in any one individual community, there has been enough experience with each in different cities to indicate that they are satisfactory. We know that the city plan should be officially adopted by the local planning agency and that, once adopted, no public improvement should be authorized or constructed and no public agency should buy or sell land until the planning agency has had a chance to see whether or not that particular improvement or measure is in conformity with the city plan. Many state laws now permit cities to follow such a procedure. Zoning can be a positive instrument directing a sound and logical arrangement of land uses in the city in accordance with the city plan. There are many other measures, such as land subdivision control, establishment of building lines, preparation and adherence to long-range capital improvement programs, that do much to coordinate both public and private development with the city plan.

It seems evident that we know pretty well how to prepare a city plan for a community and how the plan, once made, can be kept up to date. We know many techniques that can be used for carrying out a city plan. All these together might well be what is meant by planning.

The Small Town

One of the most evident characteristics of the small town is that there are a great number of them. In Iowa, for example, the census of 1940 showed eleven cities with a population of more than 25,000. There were 78 with a population of under 25,000, and of these 45 had a population of less than 5,000.

Factors Affecting the Small Town

There are three important factors that affect the small town today. For the past two decades there has been a tendency for industries to locate away from the large cities. This has been called the "decentralization of industry." While a large part of this movement has consisted of the establishment of new plants in the outskirts of large metropolitan districts, there has been a definite tendency for increased industrial development in the smaller communities. We have been warned that the best defense against atomic attack is dispersion of our industrial plants out and away from areas of present concentration. In the future there should be even more industrial activity in the smaller communities.

Improved highways and the almost universal use of the automobile have permitted some small towns to increase their trade areas. This is particularly true of communities that have been able to provide adequate space for off-street parking. During this period of prosperous conditions in rural areas, we find business districts of small cities and towns crowded with expensive new automobiles driven by the farmers, who have become excellent customers. This
trend may change the distribution pattern of small towns in the future. The aggressive towns will provide convenient facilities to attract the rural customer, to increase their business, and to grow. Some of this growth will be at the expense of those communities that are “asleep at the switch.”

Small towns benefit from the revulsion against poor living conditions in large cities. Living conditions are certainly better in the smaller communities. They are also less expensive. Men can go back and forth to work in five or ten minutes instead of spending up to an hour as they must in a large city. In the smaller community it is possible for practically all the residents to own and live in their own homes. There is ample light, air, and open space.

Because of these three factors — the decentralization of industry, prosperous retail trade, and better living conditions — it may be that the last half of this century will see the renaissance of small towns. The small town has a brighter future now than it has had in the previous century.

On the other side of the picture, however, an analysis of any small town will indicate that there are many improvements required — that much needs to be done. Often such basic facilities as an ample water supply, sewage disposal, street paving, or schools are lacking. Many small towns do not have any control of land use, and obnoxious uses are found even in the best residential areas. However, their character is better than that of a big city, primarily because they are smaller and not because they have done a more intelligent job of municipal development.

Planning Is Essential

If the small city or town is to take advantage of the real opportunities presented at the present time, planning is absolutely essential. Prospective industries are going to be greatly concerned about living conditions in the residential areas and about schools and recreational facilities. Today, most industries are more concerned about these things than they are about the tax rate. The rural customer is going to demand an attractive commercial area, easy highway access, and ample parking facilities. Careful planning is going to be required to protect and conserve satisfactory living conditions.

Fortunately, the problems of a small city are not so difficult or expensive as those of a large city. The citizens are more interested in their community and feel much closer to their local government and their local officials. Planning could do even more for the small town than for the large city. The small town can take advantage of the experience and the mistakes of the larger cities.

Why Is Planning a Challenge?

In city planning we have a tool of municipal administration that will bring about a far better community at much less cost. We know that planning can work and that it will save money. Why is it then that as a matter of course every city and town does not have a city plan and a city-planning program and that planning departments are not as accepted or as common as police departments, fire departments, or health departments?

Is it because planning is untried or unknown? This is not the case. Enough small towns have prepared and are carrying out city plans to indicate that planning will work. A vast store of information and literature has been written and published on city planning in the last thirty years. There are several national planning organizations and university extension services. Local and national conferences on planning are held every year. There is no difficulty in obtaining information on city planning.

Is planning too expensive? The answer to this question must also be in the negative. In small towns a complete city plan could be prepared for between $1.00 and $1.50 a person. These plans could be kept up to date and administered for a yearly expenditure of ten to twenty-five cents a
person. Experience indicates that any city that really wants a city plan is able to find the money to pay for it.

*Is it impossible to sell the idea of city planning?* There has been very little difficulty in selling city planning to the average taxpayer or voter. It is such a sensible procedure that the citizen wonders why his community has not been doing planning all the time.

*Is it impossible to adopt a plan or to enact the necessary ordinance, such as the zoning ordinance, required to carry out the plan?* Properly handled, the preparation of a city plan creates wide public interest, particularly in smaller communities. The adoption of the plan or enactment of a zoning ordinance is not too difficult a problem, particularly if this is done immediately upon or during the time that the plan is being prepared. The wide public interest that is generated demands that appropriate action be taken.

*Is it impossible to carry out a city plan over a long period of years?* Here is where the real difficulty lies and the reason why planning presents a challenge. While it may not be impossible to carry out a plan over a long period of years, it is certainly most difficult. It is difficult for two reasons:

The first reason is that any city plan contains ideas and proposals diametrically opposed to the ideas (and to the pocketbooks) of a small minority of the citizens. For example, it may be necessary to reroute a highway from a narrow street in one area to a wide street some distance away. The narrow street may have been well developed with filling stations, tourist homes, and other commercial uses that are dependent upon the highway traffic. The fact that the rerouting benefits the vast majority of the people in the community does not keep these property owners from vigorously and often effectively opposing the change.

Fully one half of the effectiveness of any city plan depends upon the consistent en-

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forcement of the zoning ordinance. The benefit from zoning does not come in the mere enactment of the ordinance but only comes when the community prevents a property owner from building a building in an inappropriate place. If zoning does not prevent these inappropriate buildings, it is of no use whatsoever.

This minority that is affected by the city plan or zoning ordinance is always represented. Their ideas are always made known to members of city councils, usually with some pressure behind them. Particularly in small towns where all people are known to each other, it is hard for the city council to tell Joe (who is such a good fellow) that he cannot build his garage on the vacant lot that he purchased for such a low price in a residential neighborhood. It is also hard for the city council to see why they shouldn't let any type of commercial or industrial use go into a slum or blighted area, and the statement is often heard that "anything would improve that neighborhood." The minority that is adversely affected in the pocketbook appears at every council meeting. Soon the city plan seems to be standing in the way of progress. The plan is nibbled at and undermined here and there, while the majority of the people, who were perhaps extremely interested in the planning movement at its inception, stay at home.

The second reason why it is so very difficult to carry out a city plan can be found in the local public official. To carry out a planning program requires a large measure of intelligence, diplomacy, and perseverance on the part of public officials. From day to day these are the people who administer the plan and who must sell the plan to the public, if it is to be sold.

In small towns, on the whole, public officials are poorly paid. Often a job on a local public payroll is a community's means of pensioning members of the community who can find no other method of obtaining
a livelihood. A planning program adds a considerable burden to the work that must be done by local officials. It establishes new ways of doing things, new factors that must be taken into consideration. New ordinances must be interpreted and administered. New permits must be issued. While perhaps not overworked, the local public official often resents this additional burden.

He much prefers the status quo before these “new-fangled notions” were introduced and is not loath to inform local taxpayers, particularly those with complaints, that the whole thing is impractical and visionary. Unsympathetic public officials can undermine a city plan in a very short period of time.

There is only one answer to this process of undermining on the part of the financially affected minority and the unsympathetic public official, and that is a continuous public demand and support for the city plan and the planning program on the part of an alert and organized intelligent citizenship. A short investigation of cities that have an alert and organized intelligent citizenry demonstrates what it can do. Many good demonstrations have been given, particularly by small suburban communities in the large metropolitan areas.

Small towns can obtain technical assistance to help them prepare a city plan and keep it up to date. Small towns can obtain public officials that are intelligent and diplomatic and that will persevere in the carrying out of a city plan over a number of years. The basic need is an educated, intelligent, and aggressive citizenry—a pressure group, perhaps, but a new pressure group of the majority instead of the minority. This is our basic need if we are to build better communities, if we are to meet the challenge of planning to the small town.

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