

**Summary Report:  
The South Bend AICP Technical Assistance Team  
July 23-25, 2003**

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The City of South Bend recently lost the Director of Community and Economic Development, Jon Hunt, a well-respected professional planner and community leader as a result of his sudden, unexpected death. In order to assure a successful recruitment to fill the Director's position and the most effective transition possible, Mayor Stephen Luecke sought the perspectives of outside professionals. The American Institute of Certified Planners, the professional institute of the American Planning Association, offers assistance to communities seeking advice related to critical planning issues through its Community Assistance Teams and Technical Assistance Teams.

In written, verbal and direct communication with Mayor Luecke, the team was charged with two areas of concern: to define the roles, responsibilities and nature of the position of Director of Community and Economic Development; and directly related, to examine the programmatic and organizational structure of the Department of Community and Economic Development necessary to address the planning and development issues of the City of South Bend. The AICP Technical Assistance Team (TAT) was assembled and made its site visit on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The Team made a verbal report to the Mayor on July 25<sup>th</sup>, and received additional comment from City Staff and community members through August 1<sup>st</sup>. This report is a summary of the Team's findings and recommendations. The agenda of the site visit, including listing of staff and community panel member attendance, is attached, as well as TAT member resumé's

The Technical Assistance Team is provided with background materials in advance of the site visit, but the nature of the 2-½ day site visit places practical limitations on the investigation. As such, it is important for the report to be perceived in light of the assumptions and limitations recognized by the TAT. These include:

- That the investigation and TAT recommendations are bounded by the existing governmental structure, particularly with regard to the nature of planning and community development as governed by law, legislation, and tradition in the State of Indiana, and with regard to intergovernmental cooperation within St. Joseph County.
- That the recommendations must be responsive to the issues facing the community; during recruitment, in the transition to a new Director, and in the near term of the next three to five years.
- That the TAT's analysis is not empirical, not based on detailed evaluation of a complete written compendium of planning policies and practices, nor is it devoid of flaws of oversight, unconscious exclusion of community member participant perspectives, or other errors that may have been intrinsic to the process.
- That the TAT's findings and recommendations are based on the collective impressions of the TAT members, and on their analysis of the comments offered in the panels during the site visit.
- That the value of comments of City staff members and public participants is enhanced by the fact that they were offered within an environment of confidentiality and in some cases intentionally without attribution. The TAT respects this confidentiality and has worked to assure that it has not been compromised.

## **General Observations:**

It is important to recognize the very positive current conditions and accomplishments of the City of South Bend and the Department, as observed by community members and the TAT participants. It would be unfortunate if the recipient of a report of this nature perceived it to be a “criticism” as opposed to a constructively critical evaluation, and these observations are included to dispel such misperceptions:

- To a person, each person interviewed or engaged in some way, and most importantly staff members of the Department, were committed to supporting this process and to using it as a springboard to a successful recruitment to fill the Director’s position
- The community interviews conducted in this process yielded a very high level of participant engagement and sophistication of observation. The TAT members were at once pleased with the candid and sincere assessment of past and current practices and surprised at how insightful the participants were about planning issues and departmental strengths and weaknesses.
- With regularity, the community participants identified a variety of untapped or underutilized community resources that are available to the Director and the Department.
- Although some community members commented on missing or mismatched skills of Department staff, overall, community members and staff of the Department and of affiliated departments spoke highly of the dedicated and committed staff.
- The City has many valuable physical assets that contribute to potential community strength, not the least of which are its traditional street grid, the riverfront, its regional location and the potential infrastructure to serve high technology needs of developing businesses.
- Despite a long and significant decline in manufacturing and industrial support jobs, investment in property and businesses shows improvement and evidences both public and private sector effort, particularly in downtown and in business parks.

The job description and skill requirements for the Director, the roles, responsibilities, products and organization of the Department and, the changes facing the City of South Bend are all intertwined and interdependent.

## **The Organization of the Department of Community and Economic Development**

### Findings and Observations

The South Bend community, however defined by staff, public participants, or outside observers, lacks a cohesive, documented, shared vision. This is not to suggest that there are no shared values, considerable overlap of perspectives, or understanding of what constitutes the critical issues facing South Bend and the Department. Quite the contrary. There has just not been, in recent memory, a process or product that has translated those values, perspectives and knowledge into a guiding plan. There is a huge expectation that the “City Plan” will resolve this dilemma. The TAT found evidence of a considerable public discourse underpinned by critical thinking, observation and an interest in participation. This bodes well for the planning process, so long as that expectation is not left idle while a new director is selected and prepares to take the reins.

The resources of the existing Community and Economic Development Department are too thinly spread over too many programs, projects, services and initiatives. This has induced a crisis mentality, aggravated by the lack of a documented set of priorities or a means of tying

priorities to an overall plan. There were a wide variety of observations made by participants, both within the department and the community that could be tied back to this finding. Among the examples cited were the limited funds available for commercial corridor revitalization programs that would not amount to enough in any individual corridor to have a real, perceivable impact. Similarly, there were observations made by participants that the capital budgeting process was played as an exercise of dividing the limited remaining funds to projects once the “entitlements” (particularly road projects and utilities) had been satisfied... with minimal planning or public policy guiding the distribution.

The TAT perceived that the department’s activities are program driven, seeking to document the completion of tasks and the measurement of outcomes. Once in place, the programs attain a life of their own, with little opportunity to tie the program back to well-established public policy, or an overall guiding vision, mission, or purpose and program framework. However well intentioned, the motivation appears to be driven, at least in part, by the past director’s pursuit of best planning practices as conducted around the country. What could be a well-knit planning effort has evolved to be a loose aggregation of independent (if not disjointed) programs.

A corollary observation made by the TAT is that details are driving planning and decision-making in the absence of the big picture. The TAT heard a number of examples of existing programs or practices in which Department staff appeared to execute elements of the process without participating in or recognizing the impact of their efforts on the overall decision-making process. An example was use of incentives to generate new economic development or corporate investment, but without any evaluative framework - and without having anyone look at the developers' *proformas*.

Overall, the TAT was led to observe that an absence of adopted policies fails to provide a framework for decision-making. This is particularly evident below the top level of the Divisions. That the policy may have existed at the highest level, in either a shared or spoken agreement, did not allow for the decisions to occur at any level but the top, further reducing the department’s flexibility, responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness. In each of the panel discussions, in fact, in every interview, the TAT repeatedly was reminded of the “tireless dedication” and innumerable hours of effort contributed by Jon Hunt. Jon was revered for his talent and commitment, and for his personal accountability that assured that the department “got it done”. No one the TAT spoke with wished to find a duplicate of Jon Hunt to replace Jon Hunt. The TAT finds that the lack of a documented and shared policy guide, and the lack of an organizational distribution of decision-making contributed to the Director’s well-known exhaustive working hours and to the factionalism within the department.

These above findings and observations suggest the need for not simply a review of the role and responsibilities of the Director’s position, but the need for a more well-integrated planning and development organizational structure. Attached to this summary is a graphic representing an organizational structure that the TAT believes to be a more traditional, balanced model that permits the reintroduction of big-picture planning into the department. This alternative to the existing division organization is derived from the departmental structures found in similarly mature communities where planning has a central role in support of community decision-making. The Department would therefore, be renamed to reflect the new focus of a big picture department. This structure would provide the Director the opportunity to lead, delegate and facilitate a more distributed and policy based decision-making organization.

The new divisions as illustrated on the table of organization would allow a clear division of labor and would help the department focus on specific outcomes. The Planning Division would “plan” and handle the traditional mid- to long range and big picture issues. The Planning Division would also outline the big picture or comprehensive planning and policy approach to improve the city that the other divisions would implement. Community Development would “implement” and handle the neighborhood related issues and administer grants that tend to be short-term and tap a significant amount of staff time and resources. Economic Development would “develop” and focus on actions to improve the city’s economy. Building and Zoning would “administer” and handle review and inspection. This is not the only workable model, and would need to be further tailored to meet the needs of South Bend, but it is included here as a means of reemphasizing the importance of the planning function in a balanced approach.

### The Department and the Divisions

The TAT made an additional overall observation that relates to organization of the Department. The most frequently raised concerns of staff were that of the physical office space, and that the physical separation of staff has contributed to reduced morale lack of teamwork, an inferior public perception and service, and poor internal communication. Recognizing that there is very limited space within the County/City building, the staff understands the trade-off between keeping the department in a unified, attractive setting and having the department Director and the Mayor in proximity to each other. The staff members appear willing to sacrifice the close Director to Mayor liaison in favor of reunification, off-site if necessary. In the interim, enhanced telecommunication, teaming and project management will need to substitute for physical proximity.

The organizational culture of the Department reinforces rather than diminishes the separation between economic and community development staff. The distance between these two divisions is more of attitude, than physical distance. The staff members of the three divisions are not working together as a unified department. There was evidence that the organizational structure and the management of projects produced no interdivision teaming. Lacking an internal, shared agreement on departmental goals and priorities appears to induce further separation, as does a difference in the divisions’ perception of who its clients are, and the staff’s perception of how the community perceives the Department. The TAT observed a huge desire to work more closely together, yet a sense amongst Department staff that it cannot occur. Internally, there is not a sense amongst the staff members that the department has had a commitment to defining and emphasizing mutual values of the department as a whole.

Lines of communication are unclear externally, in that even experienced stakeholders admitted to confusion and frustration concerning who, how, and what functions are handled where within the Department (and the City government). The TAT found that many activities and programs that the community desired were being undertaken within the Department (or the City) but not well communicated to the community. The Department’s and the City’s successes were a mystery to both the community, and in some cases, to the other members of the Department.

Roles and Responsibilities within the Department are sometimes unclear or fractured. Managers think of their mission in terms of program delivery, but big picture thinking, entrepreneurialism and empowerment remained controlled at the very top rank - literally the director himself.

## **The Director's Position**

Whether or not there is some form of departmental reorganization as described above or in attached chart, the nature of the Director's position and the skills necessary to fill that position can be described.

### Skills and Characteristics of the Director

The Director should be a planner by training, experience and perspective. Admittedly, the TAT is comprised of AICP and FAICP members having these qualifications. However, this is posed as a fundamental characteristic of the eligible candidate, not because of a professional or partisan bias, but rather, because the TAT believes that the nature of the issues facing the City and the Department can best be addressed by a planner. What distinguishes a planner from other professions of public administration, architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, real estate development, human services, public finance, housing or business administration is that the planner must combine skills of many disciplines to ensure that the decisions related to physical, economic, and social development will meet the needs of the people of South Bend most effectively.

There are a series of organization and management skills that are necessary to be effective in the job of Director:

- The Director must be a leader, both in decision-making within the department and in the community
- The Director must be a mentor to the staff members within the department, encouraging personal and professional development, presenting a role model for behavior, and inspiring personal and professional commitment.
- The Director must be a team builder, focused on the development of the staff to work together successfully
- The Director must have a demonstrated ability to set priorities, both for the work of the department and in the forums for community priority setting
- The Director must be an effective delegator, assuring that the decision-making and execution is distributed throughout an interested, engaged and capable staff.
- The Director must be an effective communicator of policy, ideas, priorities, and of expectations.
- The Director must be capable of engaging major players in the community in joint efforts to plan and implement the community vision.
- The Director should be a passionate advocate of planning and promoter of the common good, in order to counter the forces of self-interest that exist in every community.
- The Director must be proactive, seeking to prevent and anticipate, rather than waiting for a more difficult recovery after the decline and fall.
- The Director must show a demonstrated commitment to neighborhood planning as a fundamental element of community and economic development.
- The Director should have demonstrated understanding of the dynamics of planning for a mature community.
- The Director should be a fiscally and financially savvy negotiator, with experience in best practices in economic development.

- The Director must be able to see the Big Picture, understanding the interrelationships of
  - Physical planning
  - Infrastructure
  - Architecture and design
  - Leadership
  - Decision-making
  - Changing demographics
  - Transportation
  - Housing, retailing and neighborhood services

As a measure of experience, the TAT suggests that at a minimum, the successful candidate will have demonstrated progressively responsible experience of 5 to 7 years in a leadership capacity as a director or assistant director of a community of not less than 50,000 residents.

### Director's Compensation

Each of the TAT members hails from metropolitan areas where the competition for planning expertise drives the compensation (as well as cost of living/housing) to a level that is probably not comparable to South Bend. (i.e. New York Metro, Los Angeles, Chicago, Charlotte and Tampa). As a result, it is difficult for the TAT to extrapolate the likely compensation necessary to attract eligible candidates to fill the position and the needs of the City of South Bend. The TAT's belief is that the \$70,000 annual compensation of the existing director's position may not be adequate. It is appropriate that a objective compensation survey of regionally comparable communities should be undertaken in advance of a recruitment effort. The reorganization of the Department, as previously described, may have a significant effect on the nature of what is perceived as a comparable community and a comparable position within the City.

### Director's Position Selection Process

A professional recruitment firm, specifically with experience and practice familiar with recruitment of Planning Director positions, should be engaged to conduct the recruitment of eligible candidates. This same firm may be used to conduct the compensation survey in advance of the recruitment. Although the final decision for the choice amongst the candidates will reside with the Mayor, it is important that the selection process remains respectful of the public and internal expectations about the nature of the position. Furthermore, the candidate will need to understand the community, the department and the issues the successful director will face before making the commitment that he or she is willing to accept the position and its challenges. It may be useful to establish an interview process that includes an opportunity for the final candidates to contact or engage members of the staff, other department heads and the community leadership.

### **Connection to the City Plan**

It was more than apparent, in fact it was somewhat startling to the TAT members, how consistent the community looked forward to and will be relying on the City Plan process to reintroduce planning as a unifying element between the community and the Department. The TAT cannot overstate the importance of the role to be played by the Department in this process, but more directly, the role of the Director in the City Plan development process. Here are some reasons cited by the TAT:

- The City Plan is of vital importance as a guide to future decision-making affecting growth, change, and community form and community vitality.
- The Community is excited about obtaining meaningful information, about the process and about participating in the process to prepare and adopt the City Plan.
- Expectations are high, to say the least.
- A large constituency has formed in support of documenting the vision for the community, and for a plan for implementing that vision.
- The assigned staff, though committed to the execution of the process to prepare and adopt the City Plan, has no demonstrated capacity, inadequate resources, no department head leadership for guidance or driving the process, and has admitted to falling considerably behind without a clearly mapped strategy to complete the process.

The members of the TAT share an extensive experience with comprehensive planning processes which supports their individual and joint observation: that without the direction of a department head level planner, and without the resources of experienced comprehensive planners either in-house or through consultant support, the quality, usefulness and promptness of the City Plan is in jeopardy. If no interim director is appointed as described in the subsequent section on interim conditions, serious consideration should be paid to suspending the City Plan until a permanent appointment is made.

### **Interim Conditions**

Who is in charge? Both staff members of the Department of Community and Economic Development, and the community within South Bend want to know. It appears to be creating uncertainty and declining morale among staff members, and threatens to erode the good graces the Department has established within the community. The complete process resulting in the successful appointment of a new director may require months, not weeks.

What are the alternatives?

- A temporary or interim appointment may be made from within the department...presumably from among the three division directors.
- A department head from another department or a member of the Mayor's staff may be assigned to the position in an interim appointment
- A retired or expatriated senior planner from the department may be assigned the interim position.
- An outside planning consultant with experience directing a comparable department may be retained for a temporary assignment. There are quite a few professionals, many of which are sole proprietorships, who make themselves available for such interim assignments.

Each of these alternatives has positives and negatives. The existing friction between the divisions might undermine the chances for a successful interim director from within, and where will the extra capacity come from to fill existing responsibilities and the director's position? Finding a willing and capable planner from outside the City staff may be difficult, and at a minimum, a distraction from the time necessary to recruit the new director. Nonetheless, the TAT finds it necessary to suggest that the Mayor make an assessment of whether the community, the department or the City Plan process can withstand another six months without a director in place. If the answer is no, then it may be well worth the effort to find an outsider to fill the role on an interim basis.

## Summary

The Technical Advisory Team has found that the people of South Bend are committed to the planning and development process. The city's physical attributes and infrastructure, along with the energy of neighborhood and community leaders, provide South Bend with a strong foundation to move into the future. To maintain and continuously improve this posture, the Technical Advisory Team stresses the importance that the Director of Community and Economic Development provide solid leadership as an articulate spokesperson for the community's strategic direction, have proven management skills, and have the ability to be the Mayor's ambassador in the community on planning and development issues. The TAT believes that an experienced planner is key to addressing the complex urban issues of a medium sized city.

Preceding the recruitment of the director, the current compensation package should be evaluated against comparable positions outside the City to ensure its competitiveness. Concurrently, the organizational structure of the Community and Economic Development Department and other planning and development activities within the government should be reevaluated to ensure they are best aligned to address the community's needs.

The City Plan currently underway, is a crucial component to provide the blueprint for planning and development activities. As such it is important to ensure that it has the appropriate blend of leadership and planning experience supporting it at the onset. At the same time, it is also critical to address the current and on-going leadership and management gap in the department. The TAT has suggested the need to address these on an interim and long-term basis.

Each of the members of the Technical Advisory Team commend the Mayor and City of South Bend for the deliberate process and desire to seek objective, professional perspectives for future actions. We thank the participants and the staff of the City of South Bend for the support in undertaking this effort.