CHECK LISTS FOR PLANNING OPERATIONS

The best-laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley;
An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain
For promis'd joy.
-- "To a Mouse," by Robert Burns

The gap between what is desirable for a planning agency to do and what it actually does in any given case may be wider than realized. A planning director is expected to set his sights on distant goals. At the same time he must keep his program aimed in the direction of the short-range target. And woe be unto the planner whose sights are so high that he cannot see the problem that needs to be solved day after tomorrow.

A complaint frequently voiced by planning directors is that they and their staffs cannot engage in long-range planning because they are wholly entangled in daily skirmishes. Reviewing subdivision plats and zone changes, digging up solutions for a troublesome car wash or home occupation case, and working on a "crash program" for city hall all have prior demands on their time.

And yet some long-range planning does get done. Sometimes it is facilitated by assigning that important function to a designated division. If an organization chart has been set up, this group may be called the "advance planning," "master planning," or "long-range and project planning" division. (Needless to say, the mere labeling of a comprehensive planning function will not achieve it if political powers fail to understand its importance.)

Left to tangle with day-to-day problems, the rest of the staff may chafe under the same feeling of frustration that formerly beset the fortunate ones now assigned to the "ivory tower." They can not get anything done, they say, because of "details." And here, without actually identifying its source, they have put their finger on the heart of the problem. For whether the idea appeals to us or not, "details" are the building blocks of administration. Handled properly, they speed the construction of a planning program and the achievement of goals. Handled improperly, they impede, slow down, divert, and even destroy the best of plans and intentions.

Examples illustrating the effect of details on both immediate and future programs may be found on every hand. For instance, how many needless zoning applications must the city council consider because the amendment procedure is
lax? How much time and money is spent in litigation because the ordinance is ambiguous, wordy, contradictory, and obscure? How many public hearings generate more heat than light because they are ineptly managed?

It can be objected that situations such as these consume staff time but are not necessarily inimical to the achievement of planning goals. But can you say this of more serious problems that might have been avoided by relatively simple changes in the "tools" of planning? For instance, to what extent are classroom shortages due to failure to encourage school site dedication or reservations in new subdivisions? Or the shopping center, the promoter of which was granted a building permit five years ago for construction he has left unfinished? Or the plant that went some place else because industrial areas are not protected against residential intrusion?

The cause-and-effect relation between the daily details of administration and the eventual achievement of plans is perhaps more obvious in the second group of examples. However, all demonstrate the truth of the cliche -- which usually is quoted in a different context -- that "planning is a continuous process." An inexpert recommendation is just as deadly as a wise one is beneficial. Both kinds are links in the chain of events known as planning.

The next question, then, is whether the existence of ineffectual ordinance provisions and procedures is due to lack of authority to change them or to other reasons. The answer to this question can only be given by each agency for itself. But often as not it will rest in part on objectivity, which, if possessed in larger measure, would "f'rae monie a blunder free us."*

One of the ways to gain an objective viewpoint about one's own planning program is to compare it with "good practice." There is no authority for what constitutes good practice but there is a large area of agreement -- some of which is covered in the check lists that make up the rest of this report.

The subjects of the check lists are public works programming, public relations, subdivision control, and zoning. The items comprising these check lists are the kind that a consultant might comment on when asked to give advice on the organization of a planning program.

The check list on public information and public relations is adapted from one prepared by Trafton Bean, planning consultant, Boulder, Colorado. We thank Mr. Bean for permitting us to use it.

The check list on zoning contains many of the points used by PLANNING ADVISORY SERVICE when it makes a critique of a proposed zoning ordinance.

A word about scoring. With the exception of Mr. Bean's check list, the questions can only be answered "yes" or "no." The right answer is always "yes." If you answer every question "yes," it is too good to be true and your agency is probably situated some place out of this world. If you answer every question with "no," you are in a bad way and probably should give up. Therefore, the best score falls somewhere between zero and 100. Mr. Bean's scoring system is more ingenious than that of PLANNING ADVISORY SERVICE and has been tried out with good effect at meetings of local planning officials. A description of it follows his last check list entry.

* "To a Louse," Burns.
Public Works Programming Check List

1. Does your city (or county) have a long-range capital improvement program?

2. Does the planning agency take the initiative in discussing with operating agencies the proposals submitted by them, and does it clearly state its reasons for suggested modifications?

3. Do you have a good working relationship with operating departments in the city government?

4. Is it required by law that all public improvements be referred to your planning staff for consideration as to size, location, and relation to comprehensive plan?

5. Is there a standard procedure that heads of operating departments must follow in submitting proposals for improvements?

6. Do you have finance and debt coordination among independent taxing units operating in the same geographical area?

7. Is there a procedure for considering the relative importance of each proposal and establishing priorities?

8. Do you have a "shelf" of projects that can be started almost immediately in case "pump-priming" money is needed?

9. Is your planning agency directly charged by charter or ordinance to prepare recommendations on a program of capital improvements?

10. Is the public notified of proposed projects and is ample time and formal opportunity given them to voice opinions?

11. Do you have a system of coordinating public works undertakings among independent governmental units (particularly those not served by your planning department)?

12. Do you have a routine -- formal or informal -- for keeping department heads acquainted with problems, plans, and proposals in all departments, so that each may know what the other is doing?

13. Have you thought out what standards should be used to
14. Is your council aware of the need to retain open land and is the acquisition of such areas a part of your capital improvement program to provide sites in the future for:

- Forest preserves
- Marinas
- Watersheds
- Beaches
- Schools
- Regional parks

**Subdivision Check List**

1. Under your subdivision regulations are developers required to install the following physical improvements so that neighborhoods will be in good shape when home owners move in?

   - Street grading and paving
   - Street lighting
   - Sidewalks
   - Street name signs
   - Storm drainage structures
   - Sanitary sewers
   - Curbs and gutters
   - Water lines
   - Street trees

2. As a matter of policy, does your commission discourage residential development near airport runways?

3. Do your regulations require reservation or dedication of school sites to aid acquisition of needed land so that the availability of classrooms is more likely when families with children move into the new development?

4. Do your regulations require marginal access streets or some other buffer device in subdivisions that border on freeways and other major thoroughfares?

5. Do your published regulations have a table of contents?

6. Do your regulations recommend or require the retention of especially fine trees?
7. Do you require health department inspection and approval of all individual and community septic tank and other private sewage disposal systems?

8. Are unusual features such as scenic and historic spots, watercourses, and ravines protected in some way by your regulations?

9. Do you permit performance bonds in lieu of improvement installation, and does your ordinance specifically set forth the terms of issuance?

10. Are local streets designed to keep through traffic out of residential subdivisions?

11. Are there sidewalks on each side of residential streets in small homes tracts, and are they wide enough to accommodate pedestrians and wheeled toys at the same time?

12. Are development standards -- such as lot size, building code, and park requirements -- high enough to prevent development of urban slums?

13. Do you charge fees large enough to offset the costs of making field inspections as well as plat checks?

14. If the topography within your planning area is unusually steep and irregular, do you control grading and construction so that erosion is not hastened and the landscape is not defaced?

15. Do you discourage alleys in residential districts?

16. Are developers encouraged to come in and discuss their plans with the planning department prior to submission of their plats?

17. Do you require percolation tests and extra large lots before approving a plat for a subdivision in which septic tanks will be used?

18. Are your subdivision lot size requirements coordinated with your zoning ordinance?

19. Do you have an anti-bulldozing provision that prohibits promiscuous removal of ground cover and flattening of grade?
Public Information and Public Relations Check List

Publicity

1. Do you realize that information about the planning program must be directed toward the general public, the city council, and the administrative staff?

2. Do you have a good secretary -- one who takes an interest in the planning program, prepares complete agendas, accurate reports, and necessary correspondence?

3. Are you conscious of the need for keeping planning activities in the public eye at all times, especially when no specific conflict exists?

4. After a meeting do you publicize all of the action, even when the results of the meeting may seem poor?

5. Is your publicity presented on a layman's basis for easy understanding?

6. Have you gained the confidence of newspaper reporters by providing them with advance material and current reports?

7. Are your radio releases brief and to the point so that short radio newscasts may give emphasis to the proper material?

8. Do you have people from your planning board and staff available and prepared for speeches to various groups?

9. Do you use special reports of planning activities for release to the public according to a special mailing list or by mailing in combination with water bills or other routine mailings?

Presentation

1. Do you have accurate, descriptive maps to explain your planning program?

2. Are these maps of uniform size, prepared

Prepared by Trafton Bean, planning consultant, Boulder, Colorado, with minor editing.
for easy moving, protected against finger marks and other such abuse, and large enough for display purposes?

3. Are the maps prepared in a colorful manner to attract interest but in a medium that can be easily amended as changes become necessary?

4. Do you have complete reference records, either in loose leaf binding or similar systems, for use by planning board members, city council, and key administrative officials?

5. Do you prepare publicity summaries at least once a year in a graphic manner for use by the general public?

6. Are your speeches supplemented with movies, slides, flip-up charts, or other such illustrations?

7. Do you frequently try to present your planning material on a forum basis, with a member of the planning board, a member of the technical staff, and an interested resident as key speakers?

8. Do you always allow time at the end of your speeches for questions and answers, so that your discussions may be directed toward the points of interest of your audience?

9. When you prepare maps and reports are you aware of the labor saving and "professional appearing" media such as Zip-A-Tone, colored tape, Artype, Leroy lettering sets, chalk, and acetate overlays?

10. Do you have an accurate aerial photograph of your city?

11. When you prepare maps and special reports are you conscious of the need for accurate titles, readable legends, and the necessity of keeping your presentation free of unnecessary cluttering details?

12. Do you attempt to use standard planning legends and harmonious colors?
13. Have you investigated the small cost of improving your presentation techniques?

Public Hearings

1. Do you provide adequate public notice in advance of your public hearings, such as newspaper, radio, or by posting methods?

2. Are these public notices released in advance of your public hearings in accordance with requirements of law?

3. Are your public hearings usually scheduled in the evening?

4. For special zoning change requests and other such individual problems, do you charge the petitioner all or at least part of the cost of the public notice?

5. Are you careful to obtain all of the facts possible in advance of the public hearing?

6. At the introduction of a public hearing are you careful to take some time to describe the general planning purposes?

7. Before starting the public discussion phase of your hearing do you have a complete description of the points in question, including use of maps wherever possible?

8. During the hearing are you careful to have speakers provide their names and addresses and require that all of their comments be directed to the chair?

9. Do you divide the public hearing discussion by having those persons in favor speak first and those in opposition speak last?

10. Are you careful to confine the comments of the public and the planning board members to the facts regarding the case?

11. Do you often consider the desirability of postponing planning board recommendations on "emotional issues" until a later meeting?
12. Are your public hearings accurately recorded, either by a competent secretary or by tape recording methods?

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<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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Scoring

For each "yes" answer listed above grade your local planning program with three (3) points.

For each "sometimes" answer score one (1) point.

If your total score is above 90, you did not need to use this check list.

If your score is between 70 and 90 you may wish to improve certain phases of your local program.

If your total score is less than 70 you probably should give considerable time to a study of improving your local publicity, presentation, and public hearing methods.

Conclusion

You are probably spending a lot of time on your local planning studies. Are you making the most of these efforts by having your planning material accurately and attractively publicized for widespread use?
Zoning Check List

1. Has your zoning ordinance been revised within the past five years?

2. Does your zoning ordinance take into account the psychological and civic prestige value of attractive civic center environs?

3. After your ordinance was drafted, was it checked to see if words defined in the definitions section were actually used in the text?

4. Do the nonconforming use provisions carry out the intent of the ordinance to effect the eventual removal of these uses?

5. Are residential uses excluded from industrial zones, thereby keeping large parcels available for modern industrial plants?

6. Does your zoning ordinance contain intent statements in "plain English" that make it easier for property owners to determine the purposes and objectives of each zone?

7. Before your ordinance or any amendment is submitted to council, does your attorney check it to see that it in no way violates the enabling legislation?

8. Do you limit applications for zoning changes to stated times during the year (quarterly, semi-annually)?

9. Are you continually cognizant of the need for re-evaluating the zoning classification of areas bordering large-scale land consumers, such as new freeways, new airports, and new industrial parks?

10. Is an up-to-date copy of your zoning ordinance available at no charge (or for a nominal fee) to anyone who wants it?

11. Does your ordinance provide for bulk controls of group housing to achieve proper density and at the same time permit economical and interesting site planning?

12. Does the definition of the term "home occupation" preclude activities that will, in fact, turn out to be detrimental to a home environment?

13. Does your zoning ordinance have an index?

14. After your ordinance was drafted did you have it edited
15. Are diagrams used in your zoning ordinance to illustrate yard, bulk, and distance requirements?

16. Does your zoning ordinance prohibit use variances?

17. Do you keep your zoning map up to date, showing the latest amendments and boundary changes?

18. When a shopping center developer requests that a parcel be rezoned, do you require him to submit proof of economic capability and market feasibility?

19. Can a high school graduate of average intelligence read your ordinance and understand what it says?

20. Are lands subject to flooding designated on the zoning map and construction on them limited to structures that will not obstruct flowage or be seriously damaged by flooding?

21. Does your zoning ordinance adequately protect residential uses from commercial and industrial uses located just across zone boundaries?

22. Does your city license department cooperate to see that business licenses are issued only for firms in locations that comply with the zoning ordinance?

23. Does your zoning ordinance consider trailer parks as part of the regular housing supply rather than tourist accommodations?

24. Are all unusual words and zoning terms clearly defined?

25. Is a certificate of occupancy required for all new buildings and uses, all changes in use, and all non-conforming uses?

26. Does your ordinance regulate the conversion of large single-family dwellings to multiple units so that they can be used by today's families but at the same time prevent the overcrowding that causes blight?

27. Is every square foot of land in your city (including streets, railroads, waterways, public lands) in a designated zone?

29. Are precise standards established for granting special uses?
30. Is consideration given to favorable zoning for light industries, and are they protected from noise and fume producing industries?

31. Do you coordinate your zoning with the zoning in neighboring cities or areas immediately adjacent to city boundaries?

32. Do you try to fit new kinds of uses, such as research laboratories, into one of the existing zoning classifications instead of immediately setting up a new special purpose zone?

33. Do you charge appeal fees for variances, exceptions, and requests for zoning changes?

34. Have efforts been made to relate the amount of commercial zoning to economic needs, and has excessive strip zoning been reduced?

35. Are important key terms such as "family," "dwelling unit," "yard," "lot," "structure," and "building" defined adequately?

36. Is the number of special uses permitted by the ordinance limited to ten or less?

37. Have you refrained from copying large parts from other ordinances, even though it is sometimes easier to do it that way?

38. In your pedestrian-oriented business zones, are traffic-oriented uses such as drive-in restaurants, car washes, and gasoline stations prohibited?

39. Do you keep an up-to-date map of land use in your city based on occupancy and building permits?