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Six Top Picks of Finnish Planning

Carolyn Torma Travel is stimulating. We see the world anew while experiencing how other people solve everyday problems. On a recent vacation in Finland, I encountered six intriguing planning ideas.

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Bicycle paths in Finland are inviting and fully integrated into the park and street system.

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A Bicycle Commute, Both Safe and Pleasant

Finns have taken to bicycling with zeal. Many small towns have a circular recreation path around the village and are connected to the next town with paved bicycle paths laid out in highway right-of-ways. In scenic areas, the path will meander through forests and fields.

The city of Oulu is located in northern Finland along the Gulf of Bothnia, not far from the border with Sweden. Oulu is a planning lover's delight. The city is veined with parkways that serve as main bicycle arterials that allow access to almost all areas of the city. The arterials run through parks and along greenways and are filled with cyclists of all ages; vigorous young people weave their bikes around older cyclists returning from work or the grocery store. The path pictured on page 1 leads to an island from the street; the path continues through a hotel complex that once served as a hospital and connects on the other side to park.

Utilities as Public Art

Most American find utilities unsightly. But what if they were well designed? Art is everywhere in Finland—on the walls of buildings, in public spaces, and in the buffer zones along high-speed highways. In a country known for its industrial arts, such as Marimekko textiles and iittala glass, it is not surprising to encounter unusual and imaginative art. The most intriguing example was what the Finns were doing with common utility infrastructure. Pictured here is a utility pole in the City of Vaasa that served as both the support for utility lines and as a stunning piece of art. This is a wonderful addition to the public realm.

Postal Workers on Bikes

Is there a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and relieve the aching shoulders and backs of postal workers? Yes: Give them a bicycle. Here is a bike at rest on the main shopping street of the 18th century seaport town of Rauma as the postal worker delivers mail to a shop. The city is also a protected World Heritage Site and it is likely that the city officials wished to take cars and trucks out of the historic city center. While this hardly falls within the purview of an American planning commission to control, it is nonetheless an interesting way to go green.

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Accommodating Children in Public Places

The American Planning Association has recently undertaken a Family Friendly Cities initiative (read more at www.planning.org/research/family). Here was a charming example from the open-air market in Rauma. As parents stopped for their mid-morning coffee, children gathered at a nearby table for a mid-morning treat. Throughout Finland, in restaurants, museums, parks, and other public places, space was set aside for children. Some places provided coloring books and simple toys, but often the children simply enjoyed interacting with other children. Children were a constant part of our visitor experience because they were so thoughtfully accommodated.

Easy Access for All

Door handles—yes, door handles—were another surprising experience. Famed architect Alvar Aalto turned brass handles into elegant works of art, but it was another door that combined function and style. This entry door to a building on the campus of the University of Vaasa was accessible to people of differing heights, including those in wheelchairs. As I reached for the ball at the top of the bar, I found it was the perfect height. The door opened with little effort in a simple smooth motion that put very little stress on the shoulder. It was the many design details that made Finnish architecture so interesting.

All photos by Carolyn Torma, American Planning Association

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Local Planning and Water Management

Carolyn Torma

A. Dan Tarlock

Municipal governments have always been active participants in water resources development and management.

Cities must find adequate supplies of water, deal with flood risks, and comply with increasingly stringent wastewater treatment and discharge standards as well as comply with strong drinking water standards. In the future local governments must manage water in the face of increasing stresses.

Federal and state governments provided considerable help to local governments in the past by constructing carryover storage reservoirs and upstream flood control reservoirs and levees. There will be less federal and state help in the future. The reclamation or "big dam" era is over. Federal water infrastructure expenditures have steadily declined for three decades. New supplies will primarily come more from the reallocation of existing agricultural supplies rather than traditional forms of supply augmentation such as storage capture.

Local governments must now manage water in the face of climate change. A cascade of global climate change studies continue to confirm that arid and semiarid areas such as the western U.S. face the risk of diminshed available water supplies as precipitation decreases and temperatures increase. Humid areas are not immune from the adverse effects of climate change; they will experience both more floods and intense droughts.

It is currently not easy to incorporate climate change scenarios into state water planning because existing models do not permit managers to go from large-scale models to specific watersheds and from watershed models to regional predictions, although progress is being made on this front. But we do know that existing hydrologic models are no longer adequate guides for water supply, flood, and pollution control planning. They assumed a relatively constant or stationary world.

The net result of these stresses is that the responsibility for water management is being forced upon local governments with less and less federal and state back-up. As local governments assume more responsibility, they will have to become even more involved in the politics and management of the watersheds and aquifers that benefit them.

Pressures for greater local responsibility are breaking down the historic disconnect between water and land planning. Historically, land-use and water supply planning have been carried out separately, but many states are now linking water and land-use controls. This linkage has at least two important and related consequences for local governments. First, it increases the pressure of cities to find long-term, reliable supplies that accurately reflect both the government's projected need for the water and risks such as climate change. Second, it requires a tighter coordination of water and land-use controls. Courts have increasingly upheld a community's discretion to deny development permission in areas with inadequate water supplies, and courts have also held that landowners have no constitutional right to use groundwater if individual well use poses public health risks or if a conservation regime has been put in place. There is no fundamental right to use water from a particular source.

The passage of assured water supply or "show me" laws is one manifestation of the devolution of water management downward and this new linkage. California's illustrates the responsibility local governments have to secure adequate, reliable, drought-poof supplies. California enacted legislation in 1995, primarily in response to the rapid and dispersed urban growth and conversion of prime agricultural land in northern California and the San Joaquin Valley. The state legislature tightened the law in 2001, prohibiting approval of tentative subdivision maps, parcel maps, or development agreements for subdivisions of more than 500 units unless there is a sufficient water supply. If the supplier has fewer than 5,000 connections, the adequate supply requirement applies to any subdivision that will amount to a 10 percent increase in service connections. Sufficient supply is defined as the total supply available during "normal, single-dry, and multiple-dry years within a 20-year projection." To calculate this, the supplier must include a number of contingencies such as the availability of water from water supply projects; federal, state, and local water initiatives; and water conservation. Enforcement is tied to the duty of water suppliers to prepare urban water management plans. Water supply assessments must either be consistent with these plans or meet the available water supply criteria. Assessments may trigger a duty to acquire additional water supplies. There have already been permit denials based on the lack of an adequate water supply. Similar laws exist in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Nevada and Washington. Other states have begun to link water and land-use planning through concurrency requirements.

Few communities may follow the lead of Santa Fe, New Mexico, but the city's water and land-use linkage illustrates how water can constrain urban growth. The city has restricted new water connections outside city limits unless the customer has a valid, preexisting agreement for water service. The city's 2003 Water Budget Administrative Ordinance requires all new projects within the city to offset a project's water budget by retrofitting existing toilets with high-efficiency units. The 2005 Water Rights Transfer Ordinance requires large new construction projects to transfer water rights to the city before any building permits are issued.

West Hollywood, California,
Planning Commission

City of West Hollywood photostream

Karen Finucan Clarkson

While the auditorium isn't always packed, a full house is not uncommon at meetings of the planning commission in this California city. "West Hollywood is an extraordinarily politically energized and engaged community," says Marc Yeber, a planning commissioner who recently stepped down as chair. "We also draw a lot of people from outside the city who live in close proximity to our entertainment districts and are concerned about potential impacts."

West Hollywood—also known as WeHo—is home to more than 36,000 residents and the legendary 1.2-mile Sunset Strip. WeHo is bordered by the City of Los Angeles to the east and Beverly Hills to the west.

The seven planning commissioners, who must be city residents, serve two-year terms. Five are direct appointees of council members and two are appointed at large by consensus of the council. "We're in a period of transition," says planning manager John Keho, AICP. Three new members joined the commission between May and July. There are no term limits.

While there is no specific training for new planning commissioners, Keho meets with each individually, orienting them, providing information, and answering questions. "Many come to us having already served on other city boards," he says, "and they have attended the city's annual training for commissioners." That training focuses on legal issues and the Brown Act, California's open meetings law.

A background in planning or development is not a prerequisite to service. Planning commissioners, who may not be city employees, work in fields such as property management, architecture, advertising, and law. Commissioners receive a small stipend—$50 per meeting—to cover expenses.

Of the city's numerous boards, the planning commission has the highest profile, says Keho, due to the potential ramifications of its decisions. Its twice-monthly meetings, which can run four or five hours, are televised and well watched. The city's website archives the cablecasts.

City of West Hollywood photostream

John Keho

Clockwise: Sunset Strip and its retail and entertainment are major attractions for the City West Hollywood; art deco architecture defines Los Angeles and West Hollywood, such as the restored Sunset Tower Hotel on Sunset Boulevard; the West Hollywood Planning Commission members are from left: Roy Heubner, Vice-Chair Sue Buckner, Donald DeLuccio, Marc Yeber, Chair Alan Bernstein, Lauren Meister and David Aghaei.

The planning commission is the decision-making body for new development, demolition, conditional use permits, and certification of environmental impact reports. It serves in an advisory capacity on legislative issues such as zoning ordinance changes and plan adoption. Three commissioners serve on a design review subcommittee that, while it has no legal authority, offers opinions and gives advice to applicants.

The city council relies on commissioners to thoroughly vet all applications. "Council always wants to hear what the commission has to say," Keho notes, "although it doesn't mean they'll come down the same way."

While there are instances where the council will overrule a commission decision, it is not common, says Yeber. This, he believes, is due to the high level of commitment and dedication among commissioners, most of whom devote 20 to 30 hours monthly to their service.

Pressing Issues

Once considered a "quaint little urban village" when it incorporated in 1984, "it (West Hollywood) has become a dynamic mini-metropolis," says Marc Yeber, former chair and current member of the planning commission. At 1.9 square miles, WeHo is completely built out. "Pretty much every development in the city is infill so we're looking at an intensification of use and the impact it will have on traffic, parking availability, and the like," he says. "We walk a fine line—wanting to work with developers and applicants but also to minimize potential impacts."

Home to the Sunset Strip, eclectic Santa Monica Boulevard, and The Avenues (an art, fashion and design district), WeHo is renowned for its nightlife, shopping, dining, and luxurious spas. On weekends, its 36,000 population "can swell to three times that number," says Yeber.

"Bringing more people—occupants or visitors—means more traffic and potential crime issues," Yeber says. "Our projects are never insignificant. They are huge. And while some may look good on paper, they can have impacts that are hard to get around."

As WeHo has evolved, some have begun to wonder if it has lost sight of its roots. "There's a struggle for the soul of the city," says Yeber.

Concern over renters' rights, gay rights, and seniors' rights gave rise to the city, says Yeber. "Since then, we've become the dynamic heartbeat of Los Angeles in a lot of ways. But the question arises: Are we losing our working-class population in place of new residents who can easily afford a couple-million-dollar condo?"

"Because we're fully built up and rent controlled, anytime rental buildings are demolished and replaced by condos that's an issue," says John Keho, AICP, the city's planning manager. "The economy has been down recently but people are worried that it (condo development) will go back to what was before 2007."

The loss of rental units is a concern for seniors, particularly those on fixed incomes. "From a senior's standpoint, are they slowly being pushed away or out due to the energy being injected into city?" wonders Yeber.

Within the city's gay population "differences in values are creating a struggle. Some are stuck in the gay community of the '80s, but today there are many gay couples with kids," says Yeber. "We have nightclubs with go-go boys you can see from the sidewalk. So here's mom and mom or dad and dad walking with little Johnny past a go-go boy or girl and there's this struggle."

Sunset Strip billboards have long been a part of the city's identity. "With their extra-large scale, unique designs, and symbolic reference to movie glamour, the billboards are a significant part of the street's visual character," notes the Sunset Specific Plan. An increasing number of billboard requests, many for signage not currently allowed, has the commission asking: "How many billboards can the Strip contain and is there ever a point where there are too many billboards?" says Keho.

Through the use of development agreements—under which the city will receive significant monthly fees—new and replacement billboards are being contemplated on numerous rooftops along Sunset Boulevard. The planning commission, acting in an advisory capacity, recently approved several requests, but some commissioners think this deviates from the 1996 plan.

What's in a Name?

Sustainability, Smart Growth, and New Urbanism

Pete Pointner, FAICP

Planning commissioners frequently hear abstract terms bantered about at meetings. Three terms currently used in abundance are sustainability, smart growth, and new urbanism. This article focuses on the applicability of each to planning, land-use, design, and development decisions at the local level.

Planning takes a broad view in the preparation of a municipality's comprehensive plan, other specialized plans, or in the review of a specific development proposal. This is an important aspect of good planning. However, there are so many different scales and functions of planning that the applicability of these three terms to local planning decisions can be obscured.

Sustainability is a concept broadly defined. It can apply to plans, programs, and designs and should be a goal at all scales of planning. It is a concept that relates to the social, economic, natural, and man-made environments. The United Nations' Bruntland Commission defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The concept of sustainability is an important goal that can be applied at all scales of planning from global through municipal and down to corridors and individual sites.

At each scale, the issues affecting sustainability will vary. For instance, on a global scale issues of climate change and destruction of the rain forests may dominate. Sustainability at the regional scale may focus on protection of water resources and control of urban sprawl. At the local level, one community may focus on reducing energy consumption. Another may adjust maintenance and operational plans to increase recycling, reduce embodied energy, and use more environmentally friendly products and services. A third may focus on jobs related to new alternative energy, such as solar. At all scales, both the issues and resources will change, but the principles remain: reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (especially as related to building operations and transportation); reduce the amount of solid waste through reuse and recycling

Congress for the New Urbanism Image Bank, Vince Graham, IOn Group

New urbanism promotes mixed use developments, traditional walkable neighborhoods, and urban design that reflects the local character of communities.

Sarah Lutz Chadderdon

Smart growth promotes a variety of transportation choices. In San Diego the transit store helps residents and visitors plan their travel and select their options for travel.

"Smart growth development practices support national environmental goals by preserving open spaces and parkland; protecting critical habitat; improving transportation choices; promoting brownfield redevelopment; and reducing impervious cover."

—EPA

of material resources; ensure that communities provide for all members; eliminate pollution; increase "green" areas and open space; and protect biodiversity. Each community must set its own pathway to greater sustainability depending on the local conditions. There is no one prescription for sustainability planning, although there are many good examples. Further, there are no perfect or permanent solutions.

Some communities will adopt an entire sustainability plan, such as the Baltimore Sustainability Plan. In other cases, a department, such as the Oregon Department of Transportation, may adopt a plan that could affect local communities. Planning commissioners should find out if a sustainability plan is under way in their community and explore ways to connect the plan to planning and the work of the planning commission. For example, the planning commission could organize a public education and citizen participation program related to the sustainability plan.

Another term sometimes used interchangeably with sustainability is "green." However, green programs and plans focus not on the three-pronged approach of environment, economy, and social development, but more narrowly on environmental concerns. Green plans and programs are likely to focus on such things as green infrastructure, urban agriculture, and recycling.

For more information see the American Planning Association *Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability* at www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/sustainability.htm and training programs for officials at www.planning.org/commissioners.

Smart growth is a more clearly defined term with specific practices recommended for application at the local level. Many of the strategies focus on the location, density, and interrelationships of uses, such as transit and housing. As sustainability has grown more popular in common currency, smart growth is mentioned less often. Smart growth strategies provide useful guidelines for preparing municipal plans, establishing incentives for desirable development, establishing policy, or reviewing development projects. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Smart growth development practices support national environmental goals by preserving open spaces and parkland and protecting critical habitat; improving transportation choices, including walking, bicycling, and transit, which reduces emissions from automobiles; promoting brownfield redevelopment; and reducing impervious cover, which improves water quality and reduces stormwater runoff."

Wikipedia offers another, related definition: "Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact walkable urban centers to avoid sprawl and advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed use development with a range of housing choices."

All of these actions can directly or indirectly contribute to sustainability at the local level. The EPA has 10 guidelines for smart growth; I have added my remarks on the objectives of each action in parenthesizes.

1. Mix land uses. (Put related uses in walking distance proximity, particularly housing, jobs, and recreational uses.)
2. Take advantage of compact building design. (Cluster buildings and reduce the amount impervious surfaces, such as paved roads, and avoid inefficient land-use patterns.)
3. Create housing opportunities and choices for a range of household types, family sizes, and incomes. (Create more stable, equitable, and diverse neighborhoods.)
4. Create walkable neighborhoods. (Encourage social interaction, healthy lifestyles, and offer alternatives to the total reliance on the automobile for transportation.)

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5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place. (Enhance identity, increase property values, generate local pride and responsibility.)
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas. (Clean the air, provide recreational opportunities, save prime farmland and rural character, reduce natural disasters, and protect biodiversity.)
7. Reinvest in and strengthen existing communities and achieve more balanced regional development. (Control urban sprawl, invigorate older communities, and direct growth in more cost-effective and efficient land patterns in terms of public facilities and services.)
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices. (Relate land-use type, pattern, and density to a functional system of streets, public transit opportunities, and a network of pedestrian and bicycle pathways.)
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective. (This is critical to attracting quality developers in any economy.)
10. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions. (This helps provide political stability or ongoing commitment and makes developers and their projects responsive to the legitimate concerns of citizens.)

Some communities have developed smart growth plans and others use smart growth as a set of principles that guide the community's decision making.

For more information see www.epa.gov/smartgrowth and www.smartgrowth.org/pdf. See also the APA *Smart Growth Codes* training package, available for purchase at www.planning.org/apastore/search/default.aspx?p=3471.

Topics Addressed in the Plan

- **Section I - Specific Environmental Topics**
  - Air Quality
  - Biodiversity
  - Energy, Climate Change, and Ozone Depletion
  - Food and Agriculture
  - Hazardous Materials
  - Human Health
  - Parks, Open Spaces and Streetscapes
  - Solid Waste
  - Transportation
  - Water and Wastewater
- **Section II - Topics that Span Many Issues**
  - Economy and Economic Development
  - Environmental Justice
  - Municipal Expenditures
  - Public Information and Education
  - Risk Management (Activities of High Environmental Risk)

Clearly, several topics are overlapping. While, for instance, nearly every environmental topic section addresses public education, environmental justice, and the other topics from Section II, special groups were formed to focus exclusively on these topics, in order to ensure that they were addressed in depth.

http://www.sustainable-city.org/

San Francisco's Sustainable City Plan features common elements found in sustainability plans, from air quality to water and wastewater.

Sustainable development and smart growth are not just buzz words, but positive and fundamental concepts applicable to planning and land-use decisions that have broad and long-term benefits.

New urbanism is primarily a set of principles for urban design that suggests how to organize and design the layout of the community, as well as design of buildings, streets, surrounding spaces, and the transportation networks that serve them. Many of the principles incorporate smart growth guidelines and principles of sustainability. The principles are described in detail at www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism/smartgrowth.html.

Carolyn Torma, American Planning Association

Bringing elements of all three approaches together, the Henderson, Nevada, park and trail system uses vegetation appropriate for a desert environment, links pedestrian, vehicular, and bicycle transportation, and preserves the habitat for native birds and animals.

New urbanism began as a more design-focused concept called neotraditionalism, as much of the design called upon historic architecture and town plans. More recently much of the focus on new urbanism has been on form-based codes that codify the means of achieving new urbanism. New urbanism draws upon strong graphic images that visualize the future appearance of town plans, streets, and buildings. Many new urbanist principles are implemented through zoning ordinances, form-based codes, and new development plans, and have influenced overall community plans.

Implementation

How do these three concepts get implemented? They can be used in the broad goal-setting for the community and in the visioning efforts that provide graphic alternatives for how a community may development or change. Sustainability can be a shared goal and approach for multiple departments and agencies and sustainability planning can help connect and integrate programs from public health to transportation.

These concepts and approaches can influence how the community looks at its economic development programs including incentives and disincentives. Further, the examples and scales of action, as well as compelling graphic information, can help the public understand and participate in the development of goals and actions for the betterment of the community.

Zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations are another concrete implementation tool. Planning commissioners can recommend practical amendments to the zoning ordinance and subdivision ordinance that lend authority to their development recommendations.

The **zoning ordinance** is a key instrument for implementing the comprehensive plan and shaping more sustainable development. Here are some elements you can consider in your zoning ordinance to further sustainability and smart growth.

- Purpose statement—identify sustainability as a goal
- Densities—permit density bonuses for special efforts to preserve natural resources
- Agricultural preservation—relate to county or regional plans and resources
- Impervious surfaces—control by land-use type, bonuses for impact below standards
- Tree preservation and grading—preserve existing trees and character of the site
- Solar panels and windmills—permit them to help reduce petroleum energy use
- Green roofs—permit them to help reduce stormwater runoff (may be building code issue)
- Landscaping—set minimum requirements using native species appropriate to various uses, functions, and microenvironments
- Planned Unit Developments—use this tool to grant exceptions from rigid standards to achieve larger scale environmental objectives

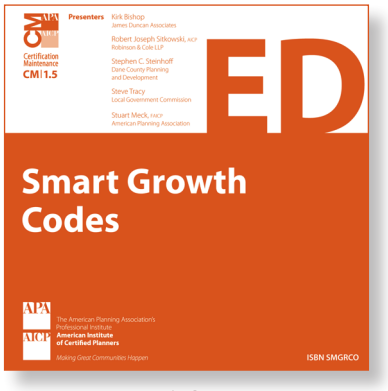
The **subdivision ordinance** governs specifications for public improvements that can also contribute to the comprehensive plan's sustainability goals. Some key elements include:

- Park and school donations—relate to overall open space network and plan objectives
- Street widths—consider minimum size to meet safety and operational requirements in accord with functional classification and land uses of the comprehensive plan. But also consider the principals of *complete streets* that accommodate pedestrian, cyclists, and drivers.
- BMPs—bonuses for best management practices to reduce and filter stormwater
- Stormwater and wetlands—standards to integrate these considerations into natural systems and also achieve habitat, esthetic, and recreational objectives

See my book *Planning Connections* (available at www.planningconnections.com) for case studies of these concepts.

CD-ROM Training Packages

These products provide a more in-depth discussion of how these concepts are put into practice.



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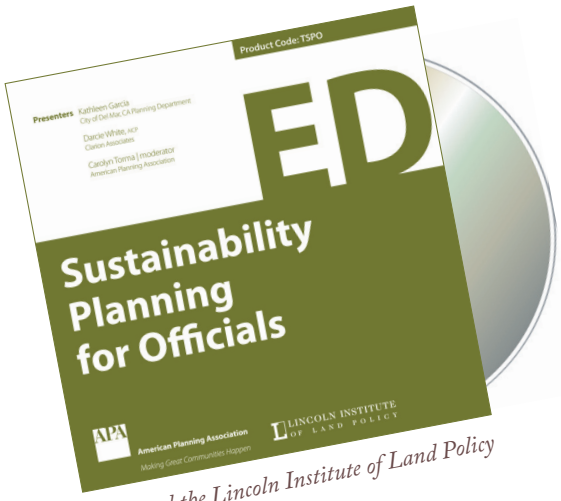

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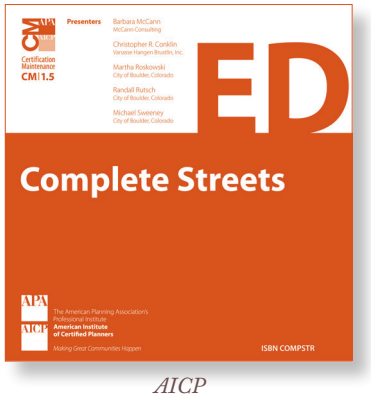

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Nature as Landscape

The Finns have a very different approach to landscape. Instead of manicured lawns and banks of imported vegetation, they prefer the natural landscape of granite, white birch trees, dark green firs, wetland vegetation, and vivid blue water. The forest and the sea surround many towns and remain a visible part of the cityscape. Few buildings have the soft edge of an American cultivated landscape.

In some cases, this can appear harsh, but in other examples, such as Tapiola, the uncultivated landscape provides the appealing character of place. Tapiola was one of the first European new towns built after World War II, and was known for its disciplined interdisciplinary planning teamwork. Justly famous around the world, the town today retains its natural landscape with tracks of forest integrated into the city. Pedestrians and cyclists have discrete pathways throughout the town.

It is this long-standing appreciation and respect for the native landscape that serves Finland in its efforts to achieve sustainability. Read more about Finland and sustainability in the blog *Sustaining Places*, http://blogs.planning.org/sustainability.

Planning History

APA Publications

American City Planning Since 1890
Mel Scott
APA Planners Press, 1995 (originally published 1969)

Classic Readings in Urban Planning
Jay M. Stein, editor
APA Planners Press, 2004

100 Essential Books of Planning
A decade-by-decade list of classic planning literature developed for the U.S. Planning Movement Centennial in 2009.
www.planning.org/library/greatbooks/index.htm

Journal of the American Planning Association
Centennial Issue (Volume 75, no. 2)
Spring 2009
A special issue on the founding of the planning movement and the first national planning conference.

Reconsidering Jane Jacobs
Max Page and Timothy Mennel, editors
APA Planners Press, 2011
This book looks at the legacy of a journalist who influenced planning in the 1960s.

Other Books

Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States
John Reps
Princeton University Press, 1965

The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840–1917
Jon Petersen
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003

Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of the Death & Life of Great American Cities
Glenna Lang
Godine, 2010

New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns and Neighborhoods
(Reissue of 1927 classic)
John Nolen
University of Massachusetts Press, 2005

Zoning of America: *Euclid v. Ambler*
Michael Allan Wolf
University Press of Kansas, 2008

Web Resources

The City (short film, 1939)
American Institute of City Planners
www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sic-Q_weok

History of City Planning Research Guide
UC Berkeley Environmental Design Library
www.lib.berkeley.edu/ENVI/planning_history.html

Society for American City and Regional Planning History
www.dcp.ufl.edu/sacrph

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Introduction to the Zoning Board of Adjustment
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For members of the zoning board of adjustment, planning commissioners, and staff

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Urban Agriculture and Food Systems Planning
March 14, 2012
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For planning commissioners, officials, planners, and advocates

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For more information and registration: www.planning.org/audioconference

Creative and Simple Solutions


Joe Szurszewski for APA

W. Shedrick Coleman
Chatham County-Savannah (Georgia) Metropolitan Planning Commission

What are the duties of the planning board to provide notice to the public for "matter-of-right" petitions? Such petitions are those where the petitioner's project meets all the requirements of the ordinance without the need for board approval. In many areas, such petitions can be approved at a staff level. Otherwise, they may be handled as consent agenda items. Whatever the methodology, they usually provide no vehicle for public input during the approval process.

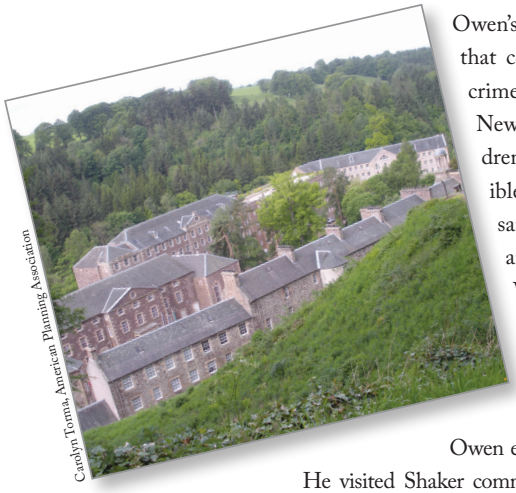
Matter-of-right petitions usually create no major problems in their execution, but there are instances where the public has presented challenges to such approvals. An example experienced recently in our community centered on the location of an early-release facility located in an industrial area. The use was approved for the area in prior years and the recent expansion of the use garnered public attention. The result was a challenge of the entire process by which the project had been previously approved by the planning staff. The resulting investigation found the project was a matter-of-right approval and fully met all ordinance criteria. The planning board, however, sought to create a better vehicle to track petitions of this type to allow the public to gain knowledge of petitions approved outside the formal planning board meeting environment.

Because providing notice to the public was not legally required for such petitions beyond adjacent property owners, it was important that the proposed solution follow the intent of the ordinance yet allow the general public knowledge of approvals at all levels. The methodology offered by the planning director proposed the publication of all staff-level approvals as an addition to the regular planning board meeting agenda. Not only would this become a means of public notice, it would serve to provide the planning board with a better understanding of the development activity within the community as a whole.

The end result of this experience was that the planning board became much more sensitive to the public need to understand the various approval methods for petitions and how such approvals were communicated. Sharing information has proven to be a successful strategy to promote trust within the local community in regards to the planning approval process. The approval process did not change, but the public is now fully informed of the actions of the planning board and staff, and there is another level of transparency in the overall planning process. A win for all.

Robert Owen: From Model Town to Utopia

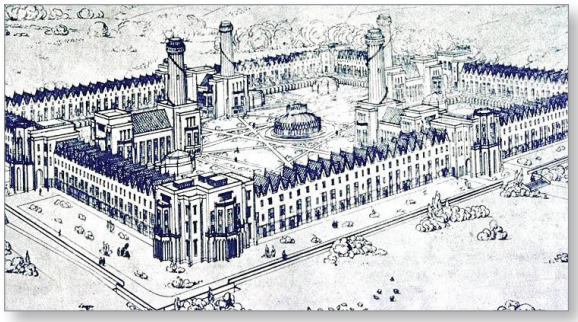
As Scotland rapidly industrialized in the late 18th century, the mill town of New Lanark (photo) was founded on the River Clyde to spin heavyweight yarn at an unprecedented scale. The founder, Richard Arkwright, had a daughter who married a Welsh mill manager named Robert Owen. Owen joined a partnership with his father-in-law in 1799 and in 1809 began remodeling the village.



Carolyn Torma, American Planning Association

Owen's philanthropic and idealistic vision was that communities could be created without crime, poverty, or misery. He expanded the New Lanark school to serve young children, working children who needed flexible hours, and adult learning. Housing, sanitation, health care, and goods were of an unusually high standard for workers. With good living standards also came Owen's fixed control over his worker's work and lives.

A writer, activist, and communitarian, Owen expanded his dream to America in 1824. He visited Shaker communities and George Rapp's Harmonist community. He purchased the Rappite community in Indiana and called his utopia New Harmony (drawing). Within two years, New Harmony had failed. Robert Owen never moved to New Harmony to run the town, one reason cited for its failure; yet another explanation came from his son's observation that the utopia was home to "a heterogeneous collection of radicals . . . honest latitudinarians, and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in."



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New Lanark, however, gained international fame as a model industrial community with humane working conditions. Returning to London, Owen went on to inspire an international concern for the welfare of industrial workers, and to insist on the importance of universal education for the improvement of lives.

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