

# City Planning:

## Remember Why You're Doing It in the First Place

Modern city planning in America originally was conceived as a tool to help improve the quality of life for a burgeoning urban population. However, it isn't hard to understand why many city officials in Florida see city planning as the act of complying with a standardized checklist, rather than a process for finding creative ways to improve people's everyday lives. Take a look at the following examples and see if they sound like the "planning" process in your city:

- ✓ **Meet the minimum state rule requirements for the Comprehensive Plan.** This may mean our plan is cumbersome and redundant, or that we have policies that don't really apply to our city, but at least our plan will be "in compliance."

- ✓ **Build roads to comply with level-of-service standards and meet the Institute of Traffic Engineers Guidelines (the "Green Book").** This may mean that we apply the same rules to a street that connects several neighborhoods to a nearby shopping center as we do to a major thoroughfare. Nevertheless, it meets the standards. And, if the traffic on the neighborhood-oriented street is too fast, we post the engineer-approved signs lowering the speed limit.

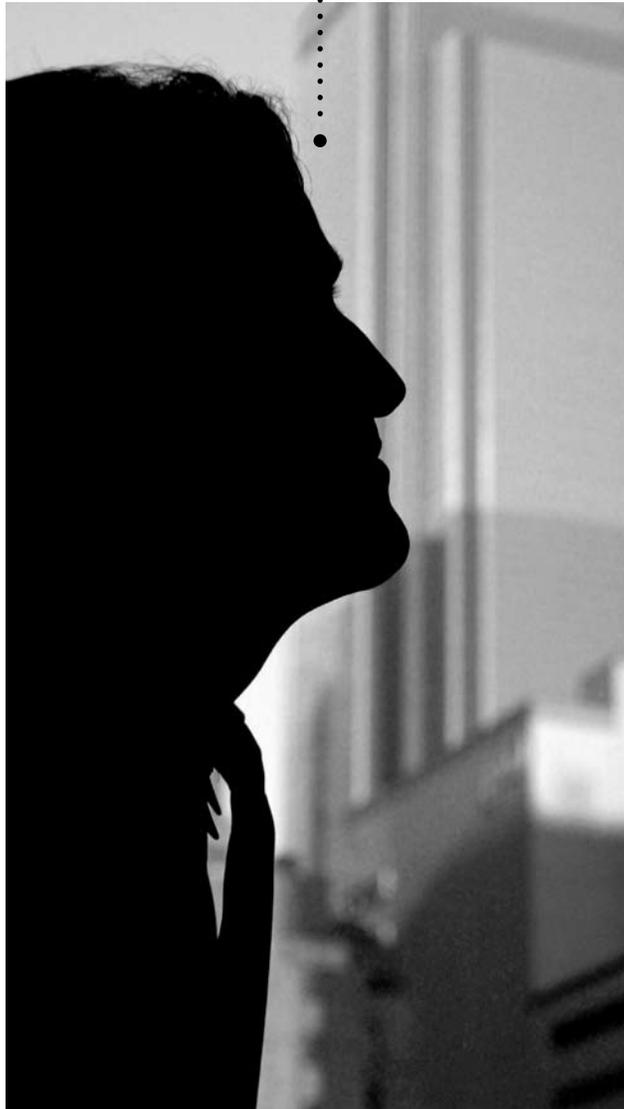
- ✓ **Build public facilities to avoid liability.** We will put big chain link fences around stormwater ponds to keep people away. We will discourage "loitering" in public places by not putting seating out, or by making the seating as uncomfortable and "vagrant-proof" as possible. Nobody

but "vagrants" will want to be there, so we will be safer from the threat of a lawsuit.

- ✓ **Have the city attorney review any land-use changes to make sure there won't be a "taking" challenge.** Granted, land-use changes should be driven by the needs and desires of the community, as well as a sense of fairness. But in this litigious society, the city's first priority has to be to protect us from protracted and costly litigation.

The checklist above is slightly exaggerated to make a point. The Florida Department of Community Affairs has tried very hard to make the planning rules for local governments more flexible. Even the professional traffic engineering association is recognizing new thinking in road design. And, as a former planning director, I certainly do not advocate ignoring state rules and statutes, nor do I advocate ignoring safety considerations or private property rights. However, despite the good efforts of many people, planning has become primarily defensive and "cookie-cutter" in its approach. The fundamental purpose of city planning appears to have gotten lost.

So let's back up a minute and remember why we are doing this in the first place. The primary purpose of city planning is to maximize the quality of life for people who live there. Lewis Mumford was an American social observer who, over a period of more than 30 years, wrote some of the most influential books and essays on cities. In an essay called



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“What Is a City?,” written in 1937, Mumford described the city as a “theater of social action.” From his perspective, the physical form of a city “must be subservient to its social needs.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, first and foremost, the city exists to allow people to follow their dreams and fulfill their potential. Since then, many other urbanists have emphasized the importance of human interaction in the city to create art, knowledge, commerce and civic bonds.<sup>2</sup>

So how do you make a city a successful stage for the “theater of social interaction”? Here are some basic principles. They all revolve around the concept of thinking in terms of individual scale.

- **Design with neighborhoods in mind.** This means planning in terms of boundaries that people experience in their everyday lives. The neighborhood includes the shops, places of worship, schools and parks that people use, as well as the areas where they live. It means looking at streets, parks and stormwater ponds to see if they enhance the neighborhood they are in. It means reinforcing the history and character of each neighborhood in a way that is meaningful to its residents. To do this, your city needs to get beyond the broad character of its comprehensive plan to develop area-specific plans or sector plans.

- **Provide human comforts.** To allow people to get out and about, to mix and mingle, you need to provide people with the basic necessities. Although inevitably you will see people out walking once a sidewalk is constructed, building sidewalks alone won’t get people out in large numbers. Can friends or a family walk comfortably side by side? Are there trees or canopies to shelter people from the sun and the rain? Are there comfortable benches at the bus stops and the downtown? Can visitors to the city easily find their way around? Does the city provide water fountains and public restrooms?

- **Slow down the scale.** Today, cities are designed from a 40-miles-per-hour perspective. Streets, intersections, signs, lighting, and even commercial districts and neighborhoods are designed to be experienced from a car at relatively high speed. Obviously not every part of your town is intended to be experienced at a walk, but what about the streets that connect your neighborhoods and your downtown? What about the streets that connect residences to parks and school?

If your city has policies to promote “alternate forms of transportation” (i.e., walking), you should have firsthand experience of what it is like to get around your city on foot. You will have a whole different perspective on roads, sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and signage.

- **Interest the eye.** One of my favorite “city surprises” took place in a bus shelter in downtown Salt Lake City. Looking up, I saw small brass “bees” above my head. The bee, a symbol of industriousness, is Utah’s state symbol. The brass bees were put there for only one reason: to delight the people waiting in the bus shelter. Public art is a great way to intrigue and entertain people.

Art isn’t the only way to create interest. Buildings and signage in pedestrian areas should have texture and character. The design of sidewalks, benches, and street lights can all create a pleasant and interesting environment.

- **Create places for people to congregate.** People watching is a popular past time. Whether you live in a small city or a big one, people like to sit and watch the comings and goings. People who live alone, including elderly people, welcome a place to sit and meet with friends. Many cities provide farmers markets, festivals and other events to bring people together. But you don’t need a special event to provide that opportunity. Benches can be put in the park, along your main street, in front of city hall or the courthouse, or wherever else people may meet. A number of places, most famously New York City’s Bryant Park, use movable chairs so people can move out of (or into) the sun, or gather in groups.

Not all gathering places are public. You probably have noticed the tremendous increase in the popularity of coffee bars. These are places where people go not just for a caffeine pick-me-up, but to meet friends or make new ones. Perhaps you have some districts that would be great for coffee bars and similar places. Many of these places are run by small entrepreneurs. See if there are ways your code can be relaxed (e.g., in terms of parking) to help these places get off the ground. Consider holding some informal meetings there, or having them supply some of your meetings.

So, stay on the right side of the Florida Department of Community Affairs and the city attorney. But remember why you are doing it, and that those tasks are not your goal. Your main purpose is to set the stage for people to live out their lives to the fullest.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Mumford. “What is a City?” *Architectural Record*. 1937.

<sup>2</sup>Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. 1961; and Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton. *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl*. 2001.

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### Resources

Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of Community*. Marlowe and Company, 1999.

Sucher, David. *City Comforts: How To Build an Urban Village*. City Comforts Press, 1995.

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