COMMUNITY STRUCTURE FOR NATIONAL GROWTH

by

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Planning Begins with a Colorful Vision

Colors in a master plan are always bright and bold, like those in a comic strip.

In the planner's chromatic metaphor, intensity of land use ranges from the cool green of open space through the warm red of centers of commerce by way of the intermediate yellow and orange of increasing residential densities. Such plans are used by regional bodies and their constituent local authorities to project desirable patterns of land use over future years based on the estimated economic and population growth in the region or locality.

Almost invariably these plans reflect the conversion of rural land to urban use by grouping the pretty colors in functional relationships describing one or a series of communities. There is more sense to this than the harmony of color or even the logic of sound physical planning. A mix of land use through the full range of community uses provides a balanced base for local revenue assessment. Both the planning and fiscal objectives of local authorities are therefore served by insistence upon a community mix of land uses for new development.

Yet these master plans become over time little more than comic-strip visions of the planners. In jurisdiction after jurisdiction, the zoning map of reality obliterates the balanced communities conceived in the master plan. Homogeneous subdivisions march out endlessly along the major arteries from metropolitan centers, leveling trees and carving land into uniform, inefficient lots, topheavy with uniform houses. The march is broken at
irrational intervals by huge shopping centers, strip commercial
chaos and an occasional industrial park. A visitor from another
planet could only conclude that the planning for such growth
was performed by an automobile.

**Reality Begins with Uncle Joe**

Why are the master plans disregarded?

Well, the old family lot on Highway 77 seems ideal to Uncle
Joe for a soft ice cream stand. The 5-year master plan indicates
high density residential use - out there in the middle of nowhere!
Uncle Joe is the uncle of one of the county commissioners. It
amounts to a minor zoning variance.

Friend Ezra, who helped Uncle Joe's nephew in the last
election, owns a neighboring lot. He points out that a change
in the character of the neighborhood has now occurred and argues
that he should be entitled to open a used car lot. "Change in the
character of the neighborhood" - these are the magic words for
applicants who seek to "warm" their colors on the zoning map.

The land behind the commercial undertakings of Uncle Joe
and Ezra is snapped up by Windfall Homebuilders, Inc. In the
master plan, this land is painted in the bright green of open
space - now clearly an inappropriate use adjacent to a used car
lot and an ice cream stand. Windfall Homebuilders, therefore,
obtains its subdivision zoning.

"It's all right," the county commissioners assure themselves
and their constituents. "We held down the density." Only a
pale yellow, almost yellow-green.
Why are the master plans disregarded? Because in the conflict between the long-term public interest and the multiple short-term private interests in land use, local government has proved too vulnerable to the expedient pressures of politics, family, friends and, sometimes, graft.

Conforming Reality to the Colorful Vision

Of course we all hope for, and can work for, local government of stronger stuff. In the meantime it might also be useful to explore any means by which those private interests in land use might be moved closer to the public interest.

If, for example, the private interests were less multiple and less short-term the conflict with the public interest would be reduced. For a single developer of land at community scale, working over a 15 to 20 year period, the private interest tends to approach the long-term public interest reflected in the regional master plan. Unlike the builder of small-scale subdivisions, the objective of a community developer is not to get in and out fast. It is instead to increase the value of his residual land by the quality of initial and successive development stages. Many builders may of course be involved, but they will be subject to guidance and supervision by the single prime developer of the community. And it is in the developer's interest that the pretty colors of the master plan be observed on the ground.

Consider, for example, the critical question of attracting industry to fill all those purple spaces in the plan. To local government, this means high tax rateables essential to fund
community services. To the developer, this means not only sales of industrial land but increased pace in residential and commercial sales as the job base grows. Usually the developer's contacts and other resources for attracting industry will complement those of local government and more will be accomplished in partnership than by the efforts of either alone.

Suddenly the private interest in land use and development looks remarkably similar to the public interest. When this happens, there is a good chance that the master plan will at last be a projection of reality.

Community Advocates and Detractors

There are any number of quality objectives of growth policy which may be served more readily by development of land at community scale rather than by piecemeal increments, assuming commitment by both the developer and the local government to achievement of the policy objectives. Every new community advocate has his own list of what can be done and every new community detractor has his own list of what can't be done; and for the most part there is no substantive conflict between the two types of lists, only a difference in subject matter. The advocates think that what can be done is important; the detractors don't or don't bother to say. No one thinks that new communities are the answer to the urban crisis or even to the challenge of national growth.

But the advocates contend that, among the objectives central to any growth policy, land development at community scale greatly facilitates (i) the creation of a balanced physical environment of
high quality, (ii) the achievement of social objectives critical to national harmony, and (iii) the testing of innovative concepts and systems for community building and living.

Environmental Objectives

A balanced physical environment begins with the mix of land uses mentioned earlier, in the full range of community uses, functionally related one to the other by location and linkages reflecting sound planning principles. The importance of this concept tends, however, to remain elusive when it is stated thus abstractly in the language of planners. Let's return for a moment to life behind Uncle Joe's ice cream stand.

The subdivision of Windfall Homebuilders, Inc., has been completed in record time, and Sam and Sally, Uncle Joe's son and daughter-in-law, have moved into one of the homes. Sam commutes 15 miles twice a day to and from work, but Sally spends even more time on the road. One child attends grade school 6 miles in one direction and another child attends high school 10 miles in the other direction. Sally would like to work, but the nearest day care center is another 10 miles through heavy traffic. And, anyway, shopping becomes virtually a full time occupation. While ice cream is handy at Uncle Joe's stand, the nearest grocer is 2 miles away and the nearest department store 8 miles.

Sam and Sally never stopped to think much about it, but each of them spends more than 350 hours every year on routine trips of this kind in connection with every day activities. And at the end of the last mile each day, both tend to be tired and irritable.
If the daily activities of Sam and Sally had been concentrated within a community offering neighborhood schools, shopping, recreation and perhaps employment, how can we measure what the dividend in time and tranquility would have meant in their lives?

One thing Sally might have done with the time dividend was walk instead of drive. A community developer controlling contiguous land for school, commercial and residential sites can design, independent of the roadway system, a system of pathways which invite walking to shops or schools. The pedestrian enters a landscaped world removed from the noise, fumes and safety hazards of conventional sidewalks. A subdivision builder cannot of course build separated walkways because he lacks control over the parcels intervening before the destinations within walking distance, if by chance there are any.

Sam and Sally never walk anyway because driving has become a habit, even to visit a neighbor two blocks away. Windfall Homebuilders merely confirmed their habit by failing to construct any sidewalks at all within the subdivision.

Of course if a community mix of land uses and incentives to walk were able to reduce the driving of Sam and Sally and their neighbors, they would gain not only time and tranquility but cleaner air as well. Similarly community-scale land development better enables local government to protect water resources by advance planning for adequate sewerage and waste disposal services. Economics of scale generally permit the community developer to contribute more to environmental protection than is available for
such purposes to 10 or 15 subdivision builders controlling comparable acreage.

The principal environmental resource conserved by community-scale development is undoubtedly the land itself. When land at the periphery of urbanization is developed for residential use in small increments, there is a consistent trend to low, uniform densities which, over a wide area, constitute extremely inefficient use of land. A community developer plans for varying densities and can thus afford to preserve substantial open space. He may build around the higher density centers scheduled for later development as the market evolves. The population bearing capacity of land is thus substantially increased by community-scale development while the environmental quality of the product is enhanced.

**Social Objectives**

Even more important than the potential contributions of new communities to environmental objectives of growth policy are their potential contributions to social objectives.

The rings of peripheral growth around our cities have been built almost exclusively for the affluent while the families of lower income remain behind in the center city. The result has been a dangerous and potentially explosive polarization of our population by income, race and geography.

Such a result was virtually assured by the process of haphazard incremental growth. We have already observed that when rural land is brought into urban use, subdivision by subdivision, densities remain low over vast areas and residential sites are unrelated to
sites of employment. Since low densities do not support the mass transit facilities which low income persons need to commute to remote places of employment, there would simply be no market for low income housing in the traditional suburban subdivision even if the builder were disposed to offer such a product.

Moreover efforts to introduce low income housing into existing suburbs have met determined opposition from residents and their elected local representatives who believe that low income families demand proportionately more in services (primarily because of impact on the school population) while contributing proportionately less in assessable tax base. The existing residents fear that the increased fiscal burden will fall upon them.

The resulting concentration of low income families in center city jurisdictions has imposed severe fiscal strains upon the cities with consequent deterioration in services. The reaction of business has been in many instances to move to the low density suburbs, causing further deterioration of the cities' tax base. All these trends have reinforced the polarization born of piecemeal growth.

Many expert observers believe that suburban land development at community scale offers the best chance of reversing these trends. It can usually be demonstrated to existing residents of the local taxing jurisdiction that the community mix of land uses (industrial, commercial and residential at varying densities) will have a favorable fiscal impact even though a portion of the residential units (reflecting roughly the metropolitan income profile) is built
for families of low and moderate income. Opportunities for nearby employment are offered in a new town and projected densities may render mass transit feasible.

In short the community mix of land use is the key to the community mix of residents.

Furthermore new residents will not fear falling property values when low income families move in because the policy of income mix has been announced at the outset and because maintenance of high environmental quality at community scale may be assured by the residents themselves through the strong community associations which characterize new towns.

It is obvious, nevertheless, that new communities at the periphery of urbanization, however balanced in population, will not reduce polarization between the cities and existing suburbs but merely prevent increased polarization. To attack the existing urban-suburban gap, the new community concept must simultaneously be applied to redevelopment of land or development of under-utilized land in existing cities and suburbs where projects of community scale become much more difficult.

It should also be noted that little hard evidence exists to prove or disprove the theory of potential resident mix in new communities because projects committed to the theory are only now getting under way. There are many skeptics, including some of the strongest new community advocates. But the theory clearly deserves to be tested in a wide variety of projects.
Innovation

The testing and demonstration of untried or innovative concepts and systems in accommodation of growth is in fact a third major objective of national growth policy to which new community contributions may be expected.

There are physical and institutional constraints upon innovative initiatives in the context of existing settlements from which new communities escape. Advanced systems for health delivery, education, internal transportation, telecommunications, recycling of wastes in energy production, and climate control by shelter envelope (to name isolated examples) may be demonstrated more easily in a new community without the expense and disruption of replacing an existing system or replanning other affected facilities or programs.

Some of the innovations may later prove useful to existing communities anxious to improve the urban environment, community services or the life style of residents.

Locational Objectives

There is a fourth category of growth objectives with which new communities have frequently been linked in theory: (i) stemming, at the regional scale, the population movement from rural to metropolitan areas and from inner city to suburb and (ii) effecting, at the national scale, a more even distribution of population among regions of the country. These locational objectives, operative at regional and national scale, may be distinguished from the quality objectives previously discussed which are operative at community scale.
Most of the public debate concerning a national growth policy has centered on this fourth category of growth objectives about which there is little agreement. In cost-benefit terms, no convincing case has even been made that government efforts to counter population trends are warranted in the absence of related quality objectives. Assuming locational objectives of a national growth policy to be valid, however, a new community approach is obviously one of many possible strategies, though as yet of uncertain effectiveness.

What seems more certain is that the approach should be tried, at least as a vehicle for influencing regional growth patterns, and the results should be evaluated through the priority promotion of new communities in selected inner city and rural locations. Government Support

It will be a rare new community, of course, which succeeds to everyone's satisfaction in furthering all of the environmental, social, innovative and locational objectives just discussed, to say nothing of the other advantages listed by new community advocates. Yet the objectives sketched above appear so central to any respectable national growth policy that the potential achievement of any one of these objectives would seem to merit substantial encouragement, assistance and evaluation at all levels of government.

The next question, then, concerns the extent of present support by local, state and federal government for balanced, community-scale land development of high quality and the prospects for increased support.