

Plenary Session # 1: "Reston: New Town or Suburb?"

"RESTON: NEW TOWN OR SUBURB"

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## I. INTRODUCTION

I suppose it would be appropriate for me, as the "oldest" employee of Reston, to take a few minutes at the beginning of this symposium to briefly review some of the history of Reston and to give you an insiders' opinion on some of the early occurrences. I will do this particularly in view of the fact that from the list of topics it does not appear that I will be invading any other speakers territory, and I feel it will help set the stage for some of the comments that will be made later on.

## II. RESIDENTIAL PLANNED COMMUNITY ORDINANCE

When Bob Simon purchased the land in March of 1961, all he had was the dream for Reston. The existing County Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances did not permit the type of development that was envisioned - they did not permit mixed uses and control was primarily through lot sizes and set back requirements.

After several attempts to amend the existing ordinances, it became apparent that this would not permit the type of development envisioned. We needed an ordinance that would give the developer greater flexibility while still retaining adequate control for the County. Finally, it was decided to prepare the Master Plan as if there were no ordinance and then to write an ordinance that would permit this type of development. This was done utilizing the team of Whittlesey and Conklin as planners, Bauknight, Prichard, McCandlish and Williams as attorneys, Bill Burrage and Rosser Payne, Planning Officials from Fairfax County, and myself as the Reston staff. After several months of work, we were able to come up with a plan and an ordinance that was acceptable to all parties. Finally, in July 1962 Fairfax County adopted



an amendment to the zoning ordinance to include Residential Planned Community (RPC) Districts. This amendment gave the developer the tool which allowed him to break away from these traditional zoning barriers and plan the area, taking into full consideration the topography, woodlands, water sheds, lakes, and other factors so often ignored, not because the developer wants to ignore them, but because he was forced to do so by zoning ordinance restrictions.

### III. CHANGES IN ORIGINAL PLAN

I should point out here that getting the necessary approvals was not without compromise. A number of changes had to be made in the original concept in order to gain the County's support.

One of the major changes was the County's insistence on a low density buffer around the perimeter of Reston. We had planned a more uniform density with two basic types: the high density sinews running through Reston connecting the Village Centers and a medium density area consisting of single family, townhouses and garden apartments. By being forced to include the low density perimeter, it meant more of the open space in this area and less throughout the balance of the property.

We had also proposed locating industrial park and office areas in several locations throughout Reston. This would have spread out the traffic during rush hours and would have provided open spaces and community use space throughout the community. The County insisted on excluding the Commercial and Industrial property from the RPC zone and locating all of the Industrial property along Dulles Highway.

The County also insisted on a more defined separation of commercial and residential uses in the Village Center areas.

There were other more technical areas such as the treatment of flood plains and water ways. The County wanted these paved with massive concrete ditches that would remain dry most of the year. We were able to finally have our way, but the developer and ultimately the residents had to agree to maintain these facilities.

#### IV. GOALS FOR A NEW TOWN

In order to measure the success of Reston, we should now look at the original goals put forth by Bob Simon.

1. That the widest choice of opportunities be made available for the full use of leisure time. This means that the New Town should provide a wide range of recreation and cultural facilities as well as an environment for privacy.

2. That it be possible for anyone to remain in a single neighborhood throughout his life, uprooting being neither inevitable nor always desirable. By providing the fullest range of housing styles and prices - from high-rise efficiencies to six bedroom townhouses and detached houses - housing needs can be met at a variety of income levels, and at different stages of family life. This kind of mixture permits residents to remain rooted in the community - if they so choose - as their particular housing needs change. As a by-product, this also results in the heterogeneity that spells a lively and varied community.

3. That people may be able to live and work in the same community.

4. That commercial, cultural and recreational facilities be made available to the residents from the outset of the development - not years later.



5. That beauty - structural and natural - is a necessity of the good life and should be fostered.

6. Since Reston is being constructed by private enterprise, as opposed to the new towns in Europe, in order to be completed as conceived it must also be a financial success.

#### V. MAJOR PROBLEMS

There are several major problem areas that, in my opinion, have prevented the development of more "new towns". The first and most obvious of these are the tremendous front end costs. We all knew from the beginning that it would take "patient money", that the profit would come near the end of the project or as we used to say, "the pot of gold was at the end of the rainbow." Even though investors acknowledged this, they were unwilling to go along with it in the long run. We all could envision the value of the land along Dulles Highway in the future but Gulf Oil still insisted on selling it off and getting out completely.

Another area of great importance is governmental cooperation at all levels, County, Regional, State and Federal. Again, there may be great lip service but there is no assurance that the governmental agencies will deliver when and as they have promised. The developer is required to make all types of proffers but the Government proffers are not binding and mean nothing. There are no guarantees that sewer capacity will be available, that schools will be built as scheduled, that transportation facilities will be provided or even that the density planned for will be approved.

Finally, there is the problem that the new town really is not completely self sufficient and, in an area such as this, it should not be. There are certain problems

that are Regional problems and need to be addressed as such. The previously mentioned areas of sanitary sewers and transportation are two good examples of this.

In the future, if New Towns are to work, there needs to be a two way contract between the developer and the governmental jurisdictions involved.

## VI. New Town or Suburb ?

How about Reston ? Is it successful ? Is it meeting the goals outlined by Bob Simon in the beginning ? Is it a New Town or another suburban development ?

Without question Reston is a success. I believe after twenty years that Reston is remarkably close to the original master plan. I also believe that the original goals have been met. Reston has been fortunate that all three of its owner-developers; Simon, Gulf, and Mobil, have honored the original concepts.

Is it a "new town" ? I believe so, at least in the terms implied from the beginning. Simon wanted to prove that the concentrated patterns of urban housing could be successfully introduced into the suburbs. His idea for the building of Reston was conceived as an alternative to urban sprawl as a pattern for low density development. Reston was of great significance in that it marked a direction toward exploring possible areas for improvement in urban housing in the United States, as well as serving as a proving ground for physical planning and design concepts that could be applied to other low density areas.

Many of the ideas incorporated into the planning and design of Reston can be traced to the ideas of the great urbanist thinkers of the past. Although strikingly similar in ideas and physical appearance to the new towns of England and Scandinavia, Reston is different in the sense that it was not built as part of a national program for population redistribution and social improvement, but for profit. It's



combination of high density housing with a rural landscape is characteristic of the ideas of Ebenezer Howard for his Garden City. The major goals which the developer of Reston had in mind for his town, to combine the best features of living in the city, country and the suburbs, was the basic theme of Howard's "Three Magnets" idea put forth in his book Garden Cities of Tomorrow. His idea of "marrying" the town and country was incorporated into the planning and design of Reston. Reston was to be a place where one could enjoy the convenience and sophistication of the city without the pollution or noise, the tranquility of the country without the feeling of isolation, and the recreation of the suburbs without the unpleasant sprawl.

Howard's suggestions that a new town must be planned, controlled, and have a definite size, form, and boundary were also recognized by Simon in his plans for Reston. The balance between housing, places of work, and shopping in the design of Reston is still another area in which the influence of Howard has been felt.

Although Reston is not incorporated, it could have been, but the developer decided in the beginning that Reston should remain part of Fairfax County.

Also, Reston is not completely self-sustaining as are the Garden Cities of Howard, but it could be. There are enough jobs to support all of Reston's residents but Reston's location, only twenty miles west of Washington, makes it more of a satellite city. From a tax standpoint, Reston will contribute more to the County's tax base than it receives in services in return.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, I feel that those of us who live and work here are very fortunate. Reston is and will continue to be a real success.