



NEW YORK QUALITY

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A periodic column dedicated to local issues involving economic development and community revitalization.

PLANNING: THE KEY TO ACHIEVING LONG-TERM GOALS & OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Local officials frequently hear complaints that efforts to improve the community and the local economy never go anywhere. This, despite the fact that economic and community development is one of the most important concerns of every local government official. The condition of local properties, the quality and quantity of local amenities and recreational facilities, the sufficiency of all levels of housing, the appropriate mix of land uses and the capacity of local utilities and infrastructure to meet the needs of business and industry are just some of the factors of local economic and community health that local government officials must continually assess and address. But the resources available for economic and community development activities are scarce, and growing scarcer. Moreover, effective economic and community development frequently involve long-term projects that require long-term commitments from not only local government officials, but also community stakeholders. These efforts are frustrated by the frequent turnover in local elected offices, which often results in a lack of continuity and focus on such long-term projects and goals. To overcome these obstacles, it is imperative to develop and use plans, which are both an expression of and a guide to achieving the community and economic development goals and objectives.

“If you don’t know where you are going, chances are you will end up somewhere else.”

—Yogi Berra

Planning: An Outcome and A Process

Effective plans can come in a variety of forms, but generally consist of the following three components:

1. An inventory and analysis of the:
 - a. Community’s current demographics and projected demographic trends,
 - b. Key economic factors affecting the community,
 - c. Utilities and infrastructure,

- d. Existing land uses,
 - e. Current tax structure and financial health of the local government,
 - f. Local history and culture, and
 - g. Public opinion, including principles, policies, and standards upon which immediate and long-range growth and development are based;¹
2. A statement of the issues, goals, objectives and recommendations; and
 3. An implementation plan.

While it is true that planning results in a document, the process of planning is as important as the finished written product. Planning, when done most effectively, is an inclusive, consensus-building process. This is not to say that plans must be agreed upon unanimously or that every stakeholder gets what they want. But the planning process should be a collaborative effort, where all of the community’s stakeholders are brought to the table, given a meaningful opportunity to express their views and opinions, and have those views and opinions either incorporated into the plan or, if not incorporated into the plan, at least acknowledged and addressed.

Moreover, effective planning is a continuous process. It is not something that is done once every 10 or 15 years. Rather, planning includes the gathering and processing of relevant information, the identifying of issues, the forming of goals and objectives, and the drafting of an implementation plan. Even once the document is completed, the planning process should continue by monitoring the implementation of the plan to see if the objectives are met, to reevaluate the plan for its effectiveness, and if necessary, to revise the plan. It must be noted that a key to evaluating the success of a plan is the establishing of benchmarks or identifying and tracking relevant community and economic development metrics.²

Plans Create Continuity Between Administrations

In addition to the tremendous demand on local resources, the very nature of local government presents a challenge to effective economic and development programs. Turnover in elected officials creates a disconnect between the activities of one administration and the next. This problem is two-



fold: first, the learning curve for new local government officials is steep, taking months and sometimes years. Secondly, changes in local government administrations frequently result in changes in municipal policy and agenda. This is particularly problematic because many economic and community development activities can take years, if not decades, to fully and effectively implement. And with many local officials serving four- and frequently only two-year terms of office, long-term projects are often not carried out or purposely derailed.

This is not to argue that plans should never be changed or that a prior administration's actions should never be altered. To the contrary, effective planning requires constant reexamination and, when necessary, modification of a plan.³ However, planning is most effective when it is a collaborative, consensus-building process, thus minimizing the occurrence of changes in policy, agendas, and plans.

There are Plans, and There are Plans

It is a common misconception that "planning" is used only to establish or modify zoning and other land use regulations. Planning can and should also be used for many other local government activities, including local economic and community development, municipal budgeting, and infrastructure development. In addition, when the word "planning" is mentioned, many local government officials and community activists think of the term comprehensive plan.⁴ Comprehensive plans cover an entire municipality and address all of the functions that are necessary for a healthy community, including land use, housing, transportation, infrastructure, utilities, parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. A modern trend in planning, however, is to have a generalized comprehensive plan that is a statement of the community's vision with goals and objectives. Detailed planning is then directed to districts where specific growth or redevelopment issues exist.⁵ District plans focus on only a small part of a municipality and/or address only one or two functional issues. For example, district plans can focus on one specific area, such as a downtown or business district, or a residential district. Alternatively, plans can focus not on a geographic area, but rather on a specific issue such as transportation needs, community blight, economic conditions, or recreational amenities. These plans can often be the precursor to and used for specific programs such as a business improvement district program, which requires the creation of a district plan⁶ or a municipal redevelopment program which requires the creation of redevelopment plan for the designated redevelopment area.⁷

"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

-Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Putting a Plan to Work: The Real Benefit of Planning

Many local government officials and residents complain that plans are a waste of time and money because the last plan they drafted just sat on the shelf. If a plan just sits on a shelf in city or village hall, then it is a waste of time and money. The real benefit of planning is its implementation.

To that end, playbooks should be given to the individual stakeholders that identify the various components of the plan which they are responsible for carrying out. These playbooks should also set forth dates by when they are expected to accomplish those goals. For example, the mayor may have a set of responsibilities to undertake as part of the plan, while the board of trustees has another set of responsibilities, while the planning board has yet a different set of responsibilities. In addition, playbooks may need to be

generated for private sector actors who may have responsibilities under the plan such as: property owners, businesses, residents, real estate agents and developers, and local institutions such as banks, colleges, and health care facilities.

Because various non-government individuals and entities invariably have a part to play in developing a healthy local community and economy, local government officials should make sure that those stakeholders are brought into the planning process as early as possible to get them to buy-in to the plan, its recommendations, and their responsibilities thereunder. Finally, municipal officials should periodically review the implementation of the plan to determine if the appropriate goals and objectives were met and the appropriate plan was put into place.

Conclusion

Planning is a never-ending exercise, with benefits that are long-term and not always easily discernable. However, municipalities working to create healthy, livable, economically vibrant communities are more likely to achieve their economic and community development goals if they develop and implement a plan.

Endnotes

1. Public opinion can be ascertained through frequent planning meetings, visioning workshops, community surveys, and other stakeholder meetings.
2. "Metrics are a system of parameters or ways of quantitative and periodic assessment of a process that is to be measured, along with the procedures to carry out such measurement and the procedures for the interpretation of the assessment in the light of previous or comparable assessments." Wikipedia.org, November 29, 2006.
3. "It is a bad plan that admits of no modification." Publius Syrus.
4. Comprehensive plan, master plan, and general plan generally can and are used synonymously.
5. See *The Practice of Local Government Planning*, 2d Edition, ICMA.
6. General Municipal Law § 980-d.
7. General Municipal Law § 970-f.