



Putting Communities in the Driver's Seat

Few communities are in the driver's seat regarding their destiny. Lacking a clear understanding of what presently exists, local officials are unable to describe what they need or formulate clear visions of what they wish to become. As a result local officials, particularly local land use officials, operate in a reactive mode. When residents demand that new developments be denied because they will destroy a significant natural resource, the local officials are fearful because they do not know if the residents are right. The land use officials react with surprise and concern when fellow residents criticize them for producing a landscape littered with one acre homesites laid out as ice cube trays served by roads wide enough to land aircraft. They are also criticized for promoting commercial strips whose predominant features are stores the size of subdivisions surrounded by pollutant laded asphalt and endless chains of fast food restaurants, acting as modern day, neon sirens tempting the motorist to their pleasure dooms of drive-thru window dining. Local land use commissions, operating in permanent reactive mode, seek to avoid final action by subjecting the applicant to a seemingly endless round of hearings, public debates and site plan modifications, all in the hope that the developer will give up and leave town in utter frustration.

Defensive Driving

Land use officials act defensively when they lack comprehensive land use plans and related land use regulations that clearly define areas the town wishes to preserve as well as areas to be developed. These regulations provide standards as to how development should occur to protect the environment. In many communities the only imaginative planning is that done by developers who wish to try something new, yet these innovative developments are continually rejected because they do not comply with regulations based on models developed in the 1920s. What generally results is development that neither party feels is the best that could be done. Residents who assumed their property values were being protected and enhanced by local officials are shocked to see their natural landscape destroyed while property taxes skyrocket. While public anger is often directed at developers, in most cases it should be directed at the local commissioners who have failed to develop imaginative land use plans and regulations.

It Ain't Some Weird Science

The future of our communities rests in the hands of local land use officials. If we are to address the issues of sustainability, sprawl, smart growth, balancing conservation and development, ecosystem health, natural and cultural resource protection management and all the other current buzz topics de jour, we must begin with a solid natural resource based land use planning initiative. It is ironic that as many agencies redefine themselves to be better positioned to receive real or perceived tons of grant money associated with these popular issues, they scramble to develop “new and unique” ways to approach the “problem.” As an educational institution with many years experience in land use planning, we believe that sprawl and sustainability are land use issues that can and should be discussed and decided at the local level by volunteer commissioners. To affect rational land use decisions, local land use officials need to better understand basic land use planning principles. The planning principles used to design a sustainable site are the same used to design neighborhoods, communities, regions and ecosystems. Natural resource based land use planning is not some weird science only understood by a small cadre of highly trained technicians. Land use planning is common sense. When local officials and the general public are educated as to its practical applications, they possess the skills to produce plans and regulations that result in sustainable communities. Armed with a greater understanding of land use planning, local officials can place themselves and hence their community in the driver’s seat regarding their destiny.

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NEMO is an educational program of the University of Connecticut, Cooperative Extension System, Connecticut Sea Grant College Program and Natural Resources Management and Engineering Department. In addition to support from UConn, NEMO is funded by grants from the CT DEP Nonpoint Source Program and the NOAA Connecticut Sea Grant College Program. NEMO is a program of the Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR). Land, Sea and Space Grant collaborating. For more information about CLEAR, visit clear.uconn.edu.

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