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New Wave Plans

By Gregory Longhini

Be honest. When was the last time you read a comprehensive plan? Not just researched, studied, or reviewed one, but actually read it?

Even better, when was the last time you saw an article discuss one, listened to an inspired speaker praise one, or heard a proud citizen commend one? As the ever-expanding field of planning rushes headlong into new and exciting areas, the comprehensive plan may be ignored as an embarrassing and costly relic of our immediate past.

Yet, despite the cynicism of some planning professionals, the comprehensive plan is still an integral part of many community planning programs. PAS subscribers are still concerned about developments around the country—the number of questions on this subject has not lessened in recent years. These inquiries take a variety of forms: What's new? Who's done some good ones lately? Who's done them cheaply?

These are good questions. With the demise of the HUD 701 program, basic planning grants to help underwrite the costs of developing a plan are more difficult to get. Faced with staff cutbacks and decreasing revenues, many planning departments allocate their remaining resources to current projects and essential administrative services. Citizens and politicians demand economies, yet the same citizens and politicians ask the question: "If planners aren't going to plan for the future, what are we paying them for?"

Lack of money isn't the only problem facing comprehensive plans. Many plans are too long and too boring, besides lacking a clearly defined audience. Short descriptions, written in third-grade prose, can be followed by overly complex tables and graphs—if the subject matter is linked at all. Who are these plans written for? Citizens, technical experts, other planners, or the mayor and city council?

Often they are written for none of the above. Style and substance are determined mainly by whatever requirements funders and state legislators specify. 701 plans had to follow the format devised by HUD. Some states have elaborate requirements for local planning documents. Ken Topping, director of planning for San Bernardino County, sums up the situation in California as follows:

State mandates have increased the scope and complexity of local planning. Now, each city and county must adopt a comprehensive, long-range general plan addressing nine mandatory elements (land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, seismic safety, public safety, and scenic highways) to the extent that each element affects

a particular locality. The required content of certain elements is spelled out in detail and elaborated by guidelines issued by separate agencies.

In light of these restrictions governing the nature and format of the comprehensive plan, creative, innovative plans are extremely rare. It is no wonder that planners continually search for any recent trends in the field pointing to a saner way of doing business.

Responding to this need, the *PAS Memo* last May asked subscribers to send in plans that were new or innovative—"new wave" is the term we used. This term apparently struck a chord in our subscribers, since many planners used the term when sending in their plans.

The term here means those plans that stand out as being different from the norm. In the selection process, greater emphasis was placed on style over substance, design over content, because so much of a comprehensive plan is local policy applied to local conditions. What, after all, can a rural Mississippi county learn from a California megalopolis?

The Traditional Plan: Oak Park, Illinois*

Although it is five years old, this plan is so well organized and professionally designed that inclusion in this list is a must. The plan begins with a short, two-page introductory chapter, "Purpose and Philosophy of the Comprehensive Plan 1979." Besides giving a brief history of the community, the chapter sketches the goals of the plan, the plan's general format, and instructions on how to use it.

Each of the next five chapters—Housing, Transportation and Parking, Public Facilities and Services, Economic Development, and Citizen Participation—is broken down into a major goal, objectives, and policies. What is nice—and different—about the Oak Park approach is that the first page of each of these five chapters lists all of the goals, objectives, and policies. The reader doesn't have to work his way through numerous pages to find out the salient points. Although such an approach seems like an obvious design solution to the complexities of a plan, most plans don't use this helpful device.

The typography and layout of the pages are also excellent. The strong, bold type on sturdy paper, coupled with single spacing and a two-column format, demands to be read. The plan flows smoothly from page to page. These concepts may seem simple, but, judging from the many plans reviewed, these design aspects are largely ignored.

What many plans contain, unfortunately, is double-spaced, single-column typewriter type, poorly reproduced and bound with a cheap spiral binding. The plans

*Oak Park is a fully developed suburb on the western border of Chicago, with a population of 60,000.

TABLE II-5: Changes in Oak Park Population, 1970-1975

Measure	1970	1975	Percentage Change
Total Population	62,511	59,773*	-4.4%
Number of Households	22,620	22,982	+1.6%
Persons per Household	2.76	2.60	-5.8%
Persons 62+ years of age	12,426	14,662	+18.0%
Proportion of persons 62+ years of age	19.9%	24.5%	+23.1%
Number of Households Headed by Person 62+ years of age	7,713	9,285	+20.4%
Proportion of Total Households Headed by Person 62+ years of age	34.1%	40.4%	+18.5%
Number of Persons per Household, Head of Household 62+ years of age	1.61	1.58	-1.9%

*Internal Revenue Service

Source: 1978 Oak Park Housing Needs Study

look and read like bad college term papers. Rather than projecting bold, direct statements in a simple, clear style, many plans look as haphazard as the writing found in the text. Books and reports are only as good as the quality of their typography and design; plans are no different.

The direct, simple style of the Oak Park plan is evident in the charts and graphs used throughout the text. There are no complex multiple-row, multiple-column tables overwhelming the reader with too many facts. The Oak Park plan uses simple, two-column charts, displaying only what information is needed to highlight or illustrate a trend.

The above table is a good example of this clear, simple technique. It lists only a few demographic statistics, compared over a five-year period. An important trend emerges: the city's population is aging. What we don't see is a list of irrelevant facts—such as the number of school children or what percentage of the population is married—that is, demographic statistics thrown in just because they exist. The table highlights only one factor of Oak Park's demographics and hammers the point home. If this information had been presented with a wealth of other data, the reader would have scanned the table and moved on. The data on the elderly would have been

buried, and the table's usefulness would have been diminished.

Because of space limitations, this Memo cannot do justice to the other excellent aspects of this plan. A glossary of terms, a bibliography of technical information, and a checklist for compliance with the plan for future developers are other valuable components. Dan Lauber, the principal author of the plan, and Bill Merrill, the town's Director of Community Development, should be proud of both the design and the content of the Oak Park plan.

The Policy Plan: Calvert County, Maryland**

A few years ago, the Calvert County Planning Department started collecting plans to serve as models for their own effort. According to Frank Jaklitsch, the planning director of the county, this process was a waste of time:

We collected many comprehensive plans but were not impressed by any of them. It seemed that more recent plans were worse than earlier plans. They appeared to be getting bigger instead of better, more complicated, more esoteric,

**Calvert County is a rural county of 36,000 people on the fringes of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region.

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and less likely to be understood by most people—thus, less likely to be followed.

Their plan is written in newspaper style, and the very first page is an attention getter. The bold graphics grab the reader and tell him that this plan is vitally important to him. The future—of the community, our grandchildren, our lives—depends upon the care and work the citizens have put into this plan. Some professionals may snicker at such an approach, but, to the planners and citizens of Calvert County, this is no laughing matter. After all, if the plan doesn't take itself seriously, who else will?

Despite the pleas for citizen involvement, this plan is very professional and innovative. Some of the highlights of the plan are as follows:

1. The plan is a policy plan, rather than a land development plan. The principal concept involves the town center and calls for mixed use within certain growth areas of the county;
2. The plan is organized into six primary sections, corresponding to the six divisions of the county government;
3. Each section ends with specific recommendations, concisely written and easy to grasp. If you are pressed for time, you can scan the recommendations and find out what is actually being proposed.
4. Because this is a policy plan, other sections besides traditional planning components—such as energy, health, and public education—are given more weight.
5. Most plans have implementation sections without designating who will be responsible for the implementation. This plan delegates the responsibility to specific county departments.

These progressive innovations, combined with a strong emphasis on citizen participation, make the Calvert County plan a good model for the planning profession.

Separate Documents for Citizens: Merced, California, and Kane County, Illinois***

Both the Oak Park and Calvert County plans present the required technical information in a readable fashion, accessible to the general public. Combining the two—technical information and readability—is the most difficult task facing the writers of comprehensive plans.

Another way to deal with this problem successfully is to separate the technical reports from the citizens guides. Both Merced and Kane County took this approach in rather unique ways.

In 1980, Kane County updated its 1976 comprehensive plan. Three different products resulted from that effort. One, a typical comprehensive plan, included goals and objectives for the preservation of agriculture, natural areas, and wildlife, among others. The entire plan was produced, printed, and bound in-house. Another product was a

***Merced is a community of 36,000, southeast of San Francisco. Kane County is a rapidly developing county of a quarter of a million people, 50 miles west of Chicago.

report documenting the research and technical decisions involved in the production of the plan. Only 50 copies of this paper were produced, for the staff and other professionals.

Of special interest is the third product: a plan map with a condensed text of the plan on the back. *Comprehensive Land-Use Plan 1982/2000, Kane County, Illinois*, is a multicolored, nine-foot-square wall map. Based on data from a U.S. Geological Survey Map, scale 1:100,000, the map was produced by cartographers for the county with assistance from Northern Illinois University's Laboratory for Cartography and Spatial Analysis.

On the back of the map are detailed excerpts from the comprehensive plan. The objectives and policies are listed for all the major components of the plan. Also given in tabular form is important demographic information on the county: population growth, population forecasts, and land-use acreage. Broken up by black and white illustrations of tractors and birds and farms, the map does a good job of summarizing the thrust of the plan.

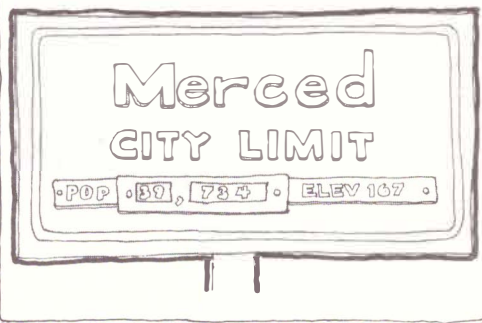
Merced, California, took the same approach using a slightly different format. The city's *1980 General Plan* is a typical California plan: numerous components, tables, graphs, and planning maps. To simplify the plan for the general public, the planning department produced a cute, 20-page booklet called *Merced: A Special Place, A Summary of Merced City's General Plan*.

At first glance, the booklet seems too simple, as if drawn by crayon for third graders. On further investigation, however, the booklet turns out to be a good summary of basic planning principles in very simple language.

WHAT'S PLAN?
THE PLAN?

Most people who live here agree that Merced's a special place. Located in the San Joaquin Valley, it's only about 125 miles southeast of San Francisco and just 80 miles from Yosemite. It is the Merced County seat, as well as the retail commercial center for the surrounding region. Agriculture and related commerce are a large percentage of the local economy. Castle Air Force Base, just northwest of the city, also adds substantially to the area's economy. Merced's 1982 population is approximately 40,000.

But, what makes Merced special? Is it the compact size, the small-town feeling, surrounding agricultural land, the parks and historical structures, the downtown, the beautiful tree-lined streets, the creekside bikeways? It's all of them and more. These things didn't just happen. They are the result of much effort on the part of concerned citizens, and appointed and elected city officials. These people looked at what the city was and decided what they wanted it to become. This is **PLANNING** -- and what Merced's General Plan is all about.



The summary asks a variety of questions and then attempts to answer them in simple ways. For example, "Why group all the regional commercial development either downtown, near the mall, or at a new location in southeast Merced?" Or, "If the street I live on is designated as an expressway or major street, how will it affect me?" Although the answers to these questions may be obvious to most planners, they certainly are not obvious to most citizens. By focusing the booklet on significant questions that directly affect the lives of the citizens, the planning department is supplying information the public wants and needs. In the booklet, planning is not simply the production of tables and technical reports, it is a process that improves our lives. As can be seen in the very first page of the booklet (shown on page 3), planning is given as the cause of the good life. True or not, this concept cannot help but give planning a better image.

Conclusion

What do these various examples represent in the development of the comprehensive plan? What really is new and exciting?

Oak Park shows that the traditional plan, professionally designed and executed with the reader in mind, can be a powerful statement for the planning profession. Calvert County, Maryland, shows that a basic plea for attention from the public can be combined with a progressive, innovative planning document. The Kane County example is an excellent reminder that planning publications serve a varied audience. The best approach may be to target different publications to administrators, technical experts, and the general public.

Finally, Merced's planning summary breaks down some of the most complex planning issues into basic, understandable terms.

PAS would like to thank all of the planners who so graciously took the time and effort to send it in their plans. Because of space limitations, only four plans were selected for this *Memo*. From reviewing the many good plans received, however, it is apparent that the death of the comprehensive plan, like the death of Mark Twain, has been prematurely reported.

Downtown Parking: A Better Way

PAS subscribers continually ask for help with their downtown parking problems. Some towns have too much parking; others, not enough. Communities encourage residents to live downtown or close to downtown. These residents then fight with shoppers for the remaining parking spaces.

Vancouver, Washington, has solved this problem by establishing four different parking zones in its downtown and adjacent areas. Each zone has its own characteristics and parking demand. Each requires different solutions.

The 10-square-block downtown core—Zone 1—limits on-street parking to one- and two-hour meters. The purpose, of course, is to serve customers who support the retail businesses of the area.

Zone 1A surrounds the core. Commercial, yet less retail-oriented than Zone 1, this zone contains more two-hour

meters, reflecting the greater distance shoppers must walk.

The most innovative approach, however, is in the regulations applied to the next two outlying zones: Zone 3 and the Hough Buffer Zone.

In Zone 3, the land uses are a mix of retail, commercial, and residential. Short-term parking must be provided for shoppers; special permit parking is needed for workers and employees. The city devised a breakdown as follows: 360 one- and two-hour metered spaces, 320 10-hour metered spaces, 660 all-day permit spaces, 30 carpool spaces, and 50 15- and 30-minute free spaces. Almost one-third of the spaces, then, are for shoppers.

Downtown employees seeking one of these all-day parking permits apply to the parking clerk's office in City Hall. The fee for two months is \$25. If the supply exceeds the demand, the rest of the slots are sold on a first-come, first-served basis. Residents of the area may apply for these slots, and there is no charge for them.

The last zone—the Hough Buffer Zone—is a buffer between the downtown commercial core and traditional residential areas. All street spaces are signed, not metered, and reserved for residents with residential permits and visitors with visitors' permits. The latter, also free, are usable in both the Hough Buffer Zone and Zone 3 areas. Shoppers and workers are not allowed to park here.

Although this approach may seem overly complex, the purpose makes sense. Make the core area parking short term and metered in order to provide spaces for shoppers. On the immediate fringe, provide special spaces for employees who carpool, and set aside a number of cheap, long-term rentals for other employees. And, finally, reserve spaces in residential areas for the residents. By knowing the rules of the game, each segment of the downtown market feels his interests are being served and protected.

