

Talk given by
Ralph J. Stephenson
April 30, 1957
Annual Public Meeting
of the City of Miami
Planning Commission.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING

Very seldom does anyone actively engaged in planning have the opportunity of addressing a group such as this. Normally, when planners participate in a citizen program they are expected to discuss the arrangement of parks, buildings, roads, ports, civic areas, homes and the relationship of each of these to the other.

Therefore, it is quite refreshing to have the opportunity to participate in the annual public meeting of the City of Miami Planning Board. This meeting encourages Miamians to make their individual and collective voices heard regarding past and future planning in their city. It also gives all of us an opportunity, for a few minutes, to consider broader visions in planning and to think a bit as to how better and more effective urban planning can be done through the efforts of you--the community citizens.

Before we discuss this subject let us briefly examine the history of modern American city planning. Let us find out what the citizen's role has been in the past.

In 1850 a young editor and traveler, Frederick Olmstead, teamed up with Calvert Vaux, a British draftsman, and together they prepared the prize winning plan for Central Park in New York City. By 1853 a park commission had been formed and the land which was ultimately to become Manhattan's highest rent area was acquired and developed.

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Some people consider the Olmstead-Vaux Central Park layout as the first gentle nudge into our modern era of urban planning.

In 1872 the term "City Plan" was used for the first time in a landscape layout prepared by Morris Copeland and entitled "Essay and Plan for the Improvement of the City of Boston."

During succeeding years the city beautiful concept took root and was firmly fixed in the American way of life by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. The work of the Fair's architects and artists was instrumental in encouraging Daniel Burnham to prepare his Chicago Plan.

Architects and landscape planners such as Charles Robinson and John Nolan began to make their presence felt as leaders in city planning and beautification.

Concurrent with this healthy surge of interest in planning came a correspondingly healthy and vigorous reaction against municipal graft and corruption, then common in the political and corporate framework of the city. By 1900 the reform movement was requiring great quantities of municipal information for the conduct of their campaigns. This era marked the beginning of municipal research bureaus, many of which became independent fact finding bodies.

The increase in the number and production of these research bureaus was phenomenal. In the three years between 1897 and 1901 the publication, A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS AND CITY CONDITIONS more than tripled its listing space.

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The significance of the reform movement from an urban planning viewpoint was its involvement of the interest and thoughts of the citizen and taxpayer into planning matters. Finally, it appeared that the citizen was to have his day.

However, as the reform movement succeeded to a certain extent, citizen interest in planning waned. The city beautiful concept became the planners yardstick. Planning along economic and sociological lines was ignored in favor of excessive concern with parks, playgrounds, and civic centers.

We are only now beginning to realize what damage such an isolated concept of planning can do to our communities. Witness the beautiful elements found in many of our cities; Miami's Bayfront Park, New York's Rockefeller Center, Chicago's Lakeshore Park; and yet look at the utter chaos that surrounds these elements. Deterioration of the economic base, utterly fantastic traffic congestion, declining property values, inadequate breathing space, and amidst it all stands our poor citizen wondering how it all happened. Actually, he has himself to blame for many of these problems.

Look at the classic conflict between a city beautiful planner and the practical city administrator. In 1940 Robert Moses, then New York Commissioner of Parks, challenged the social implications of a land use plan prepared by Rexford Tugwell, Chairman of the New York Planning Commission.

Moses' objection was the effect upon the city's financial structure which would be caused by following Tugwell's recommendation to increase green belt areas by some 48,000 acres. More basic, however, was his opposition to the concept of "a socialistic planned economy whose aim is to reconstruct the entire city and with it our economic and political systems."

The inability of those Moses had termed "long-hair planners" to reply to his charges seriously weakened constructive planning efforts in New York.

More significant is the conspicuous lack of citizen action to resolve what was, and is, obviously an eroding stalemate. The citizens in this matter have allowed a sequence of piecemeal planning accomplished by establishing limited objectives to take precedence over effective long-range planning.

There has been little, if any, effort on the part of the citizen to resolve the problem; to take the best features of the practical administrator's plans and the long-haired visionaries plans and weld them into an operating unit. Instead a crippling disagreement has been allowed to proceed to the point of no return for either party, while the major offender, John Q. Public, stands bewildered and hyper tensed amidst his concrete, steel and asphalt environment.

Actually recent experiences have proved that the practical and the aesthetic elements of planning can be successfully combined; that long-range planning can be effective in a democratic free enterprise system; but strong citizen interest and participation are essential.

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Why is this true? Many people feel that the city planning department should do all of the planning. Here is a technical staff working under the direction of our elected and appointed officials. Why should it be necessary, or even desirable, for us to participate further than to go to the polls and to pay our taxes?

This is a fair question. So, let's take the planning staff and see what they are and what they do. Let's examine just one of their functions-- zoning. Let's see how the time of these professional employees responsible to the citizens of the community is used to give us better and more efficient land use.

First, we should define our planning department. We should give substance to their responsibilities. One definition which I particularly like states that our planning staff should "promote and implement the most effective spatial arrangement of component parts of the metropolis within whatever financial limits the people can afford and will accept."

The intent is clear. Our planners, by this definition, must be creative, they must be practical, they must be sympathetic and they must be effective. Furthermore it is their responsibility to solicit and then heed citizen participation.

Does this happen? We expect technically competent personnel on the staff of our city to plan our water systems, to design our sewage treatment plants, to protect our health, to locate our roads, to guard the economic base of our city, to administer our government and to write our municipal laws. Yet we emasculate our planning departments, the group that should weld these elements into a healthy environment, by denying them the right to act as planners.

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Instead we usually saddle this group we have already defined as imaginative, sympathetic, practical and highly trained with the nearly full time bookkeeping function known as "the review of requests for changes to or variances of the zoning ordinance." Our planning staff is made the whipping boy of any and all who seek to exploit land location and use for their own interests. Our planners are forced by the sheer impossibility of planning-without-adequate-funds-or-time to merely adapt land use plans generally long obsolete to changing conditions. This without an opportunity to participate in truly effective zoning and planning for all citizens of our cities.

In essence when carried to its extreme our planning can be said, in many cases, to be done by vested interests strong enough to exert disproportionate pressures upon our municipal planning agencies.

I do not mean to imply that zoning and its exceptions should be rigid, or that they are not essential. However, I do say that talent is being misused when our "imaginative, sympathetic, practical and highly trained" planning groups must expend from sixty to ninety percent of their time and budget on the review of zoning requests.

It stands to reason that in government by the people that the direction must come from the people. If the elements of inadequate attention to long range planning appear, and I don't know a community where this has not happened, then it is the duty of the individual citizen to find out why this is so and to do something about it.

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Unfortunately, we do not have adequate time tonight to pursue this matter in great detail, but I am certain that every city planning staff from here to Timbuktu could and would recommend ways and means of saving and better spending thousands of dollars each year now expended wastefully on zoning matters if they were given the ear and support of interested citizens.

If this is the case, what can we do? How can we as citizens better participate, not only in planning matters, but in all government functions? True, we vote and pay taxes, but how else can we act positively and constructively to help our community government?

Experience has proved that special interest areas such as retail trade, planned industrial districts, slum clearance projects, and others possess organisational elements which might help us find an answer to these questions.

In other fields we find such organisations as the Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Women Voters, Searchlight groups, and even in our city government many times we find specialized commissions composed wholly of voluntary citizen help. Perhaps we can draw on some of this wealth of organisational material and use it to broaden the base of citizen participation in our community government.

For mental exercise let's, for the next few minutes, visualise and construct a citizen group which would act as an incentive to good municipal government. After all, this will then accomplish the original goal we established this evening; namely, more effective citizen participation in urban planning.

First, what should be the function of such a group?

- It should provide the citizen an opportunity for continuous expression of his or her ideas.**
- It should efficiently, fairly and effectively provide the check and balance system expected of private enterprise and individuals in our elective system.**
- It should insure by group action, without the destruction of opportunity for individual initiative, that needed municipal projects will be undertaken.**
- It should furnish a source of supplemental funds to aid in certain administrative functions of municipal government.**
- It should furnish the sanction and prestige required to insure proper and effective reception and implementation of projects sponsored by the group.**
- It should continually be alert to recommend to government officials and citizens alike those actions which will contribute to a better and richer way of life.**

Now that we have defined the function, what shall be the organizational characteristics of our citizen group?

- It should be composed of individual members representative of all trades and all walks of life.**
- It should be wholly voluntary and exist only by common consent of its members.**
- It should be wholly financed by its members and their activities.**

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---It should be non-profit in nature and have no extra-legal powers.

---It must be flexible enough in structure to allow new representative elements to be introduced and unused elements to be discarded.

This then is the functional and organizational specification for our comprehensive citizen participation group. We can now establish an effective framework around which such a group can exist.

I would like to briefly describe how one such organization might be built.

Membership of all citizens would be solicited and encouraged. Each member would belong to a functional group such as retail, educational, manufacturing, or others based upon his desires and skills. Each of these groups, and there might be as many as twenty or twenty-five, would be represented proportionately on a Board of Directors.

The Board's function would be to act for the organization just as does the Board of Directors in a private business.

The work of the organization would be done through its committees which would be open to all members. These committees would be of such number and function so that they would have areas of responsibility similar to all those that exist in municipal government.

For example, there would be a planning committee which should concern itself with all aspects of physical urban planning. There would be a legislative committee, a finance committee, an educational committee, as well as others that might be needed.

A steering committee composed of the officers of the Board of Directors and the working chairmen of all committees would assist the Board of Directors in its work.

Thus the individual members acting through their functional groups, on their committees, and ultimately represented by their Board of Directors as group spokesman could give continuous aid and attention to their municipal government.

The concept is not at all new. It is not different. Already your Chambers of Commerce do much the same thing on a limited scale and in the interest of local commerce. Already your professional groups such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and educators perform in a similar manner in protecting their interests.

But what we truly need is comprehensive, unselfish, dedicated and sympathetic citizen interest in good municipal government expressed through a suitable organization. The group I have described is one of many possibilities. Others may be more suitable, more effective, or more practical. Keep in mind the organizational structure is only the barrel which keeps the bullets of creativeness and assistance effectively pointed in the proper direction.

Meanwhile, let me urge that every one of you here tonight make your presence felt and to participate and assist your planning staff by

First, finding out what they are doing;

Next, by exerting your influence to allow them to thoroughly plan your city and

Finally, by supporting the recommendations made by these people in whom you have placed your professional planning trust. (End)