

A Statewide Planners Dialogue

Oregon planners take stock and reassess the future of planning

by Steven Ames
and Martha F. Stiven

Throughout 1998 and into 1999, in dozens of articles, speeches and commemorative publications, citizens celebrated the 25th anniversary of the nation's premier comprehensive land use planning system Oregon's Senate Bill 100.

Little was said, however, of the hundreds of planners throughout the state who have made planning work. Without them, Oregon's planning system would not have gotten very far.

Over the next 25 years, continued population in-migrations, new growth, and unrelenting pressures to sprawl will be greater than ever, while citizen frustration over snarled traffic and urban congestion, backlashes against taxation and public investment, and unbridled anti-government sentiment will make things harder. Once again, the success of planning will depend on the planners on the front line.

What Do Oregon's Planners Really Think?

For this reason, the Oregon Visions Project, a committee of the Oregon Chapter of the American Planning Association (OAPA), decided to hold a year-long Statewide Planners Dialogue to find out what planners think about the state of planning and what OAPA might do to make it more effective. Beginning in November 1997, this was the biggest discourse on planning ever held in Oregon.

In one-on-one interviews, small focus groups, individual survey responses, and highly interactive workshops, participants repeatedly touched on a number of core ideas.

For starters, many planners say they entered the profession, first and foremost, because they wanted an opportunity to make a difference. The diversity and wide-ranging nature of planning issues, as well as the opportunity to help strike a balance between such competing interests as growth, development, the environment, and the needs of society are what keep many engaged in the profession. Planners are stimulated by these

issues and continue to believe they can have a positive impact on their communities. They say their greatest satisfactions come from problem-solving, working first-hand with citizens, getting things done, and helping make Oregon communities places where people really want to live.

Measuring up to such high standards is no easy task. Currently, Oregon's planners are most concerned about the lack of funding to pay for public infrastructure. This must be viewed in light of the burgeoning growth and development many communities face and the intense demands this has placed on public institutions and planners alike. Related concerns include educating citizens about the nature and value of planning, improving citizen participation at the local level, and coping with entrenched not-in-my-backyard attitudes.

If an overarching theme emerged, it is the challenge of trying to develop and implement long-range, comprehensive plans in what is increasingly seen as a short-term, incremental, regulatory environment. This has been made more complex by what planners see as a lack of public consensus regarding the public interest or overriding community goals. As one planner put it, "Where is the vision?"

What Are Planners' Big Issues For The Future?

The Planners Dialogue generated a host of concerns regarding the most challenging issues facing planning in Oregon. Four large themes emerged, all linked by the notion of public perceptions about planning and its value to local communities. They are:

Building Public Trust. This is a huge challenge for Oregon planners, albeit one not totally within their control. If planning is to remain effective, its process and products must help build and sustain community confidence in the work of planners.

Responding to Change. Planners must demonstrate that they can be flexible and responsive to change, to the extent that rapidly changing conditions warrant new approaches or the re-thinking of past practices.

Managing Growth. This remains the

predominant planning issue. The degree to which planners help communities cope with, manage, and shape growth will be crucial in assessing the value of planning.

Keeping Oregon Oregon. The erosion of the state's unique identity and livability are issues that may undermine citizen support for planning. In the end, this is the ultimate standard by which planning has been judged over the past 25 years and will continue to be judged.

Moving From Dialogue To Action

At the 1998 Planners Summit, in the course of one afternoon, planners developed a list of 75 specific strategies, demonstrating the breadth and creativity of their thinking. The number one concern that emerged was educating the public about critical issues that must be addressed by planning, about the legitimate role of and need for planning, about the unique challenges of planning at the local level, and about opportunities for citizens to be involved in the planning process.

Only time will tell if our efforts have been worthwhile and, ultimately, successful. Planning is an ongoing process and planning in Oregon a work-in-progress. With the Planners Dialogue, we started re-thinking and re-tooling our profession for the challenges ahead. It is important that this dialogue continue. We hope that by improving our profession from within the value of planning and what it can accomplish for Oregon will be all the more evident to the citizens of this state.

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An annotated report on the Planners' Dialogue is available to those who wish to dig more deeply into its findings for ideas and strategies.