

TITLE

New Urbanism: Practical Issues

SUB-TITLE

Practical perspectives on the newest urbanism; zoning process; the architect's interaction with clients; Land planner perspective

PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEWEST URBANISM

The Growth Development Language is changing and the development community is forced to adapt. Today it comes under the heading of "New Urbanism," with principles applied and proven to work from rural to urban settings; from a single building to an entire region. The language of the New Urbanism focuses on issues of walkability, connectivity, mixed-use, mixed housing, quality architecture and urban design, traditional neighborhood structure, density, mass transportation, sustainability, and quality of life.

The New Urbanism has one simple goal;

"To promote public life and pedestrian activity"

Today, Florida holds a significant place on the leading edge of the New Urbanism. At last count we have over 100 neighborhood scale (15-acres or more) projects under construction across the state; happening across counties, cities, small towns, and neighborhoods. It is no longer the local development community that has to adapt to this new economic model but also the large publicly traded builders as Lennar, D.R. Horton, and Standard Pacific. To build in the state of Florida today requires an understanding of its Visionary Politics; and, it starts at the state level with the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA) directing the local Regional Planning Councils to encourage the local governments to basically take steps toward a more comprehensive effort toward building livable and walkable communities.

This New Urbanism comes in different variations to address green fields, infill, and even resorts. The most spoken about is the "Traditional Neighborhood District (TND)," which applies the language of the New Urbanism, but is limited to green field conditions between 40 to 200 acres. In infill conditions although less known in Florida, are, "Transit Oriented Developments (TOD)." Essentially, the only difference with this growth strategy is that it requires mass transit, bus lines or light rail, to stop within the property with headways of 15-minutes at peak hours and 20-minutes at off-peak hours; they are encouraged to include park and ride areas. A recent new growth strategy developed by St. Lucie County and the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council,

involves preserving the rural and agricultural character of a region by requiring significant amounts of open space (40% to 60); this is known as "Towns, Villages, and Countryside (TVC)"; we continue to work with all of these growth strategies. The most practical and simple to work with are Planned Unit Development (PUD) which every single municipality has as part of their zoning code; the only difference here is that we implement the New Urbanism principals.

ZONING PROCESS

The zoning process of our times no longer means just meeting the zoning regulations tied to a piece of dirt but it involves selling the "Vision." We are no longer just demonstrating tables and producing bubble diagrams. We are now required to produce master plans that demonstrate how the proposed development incorporates into the surrounding existing neighborhood, creating "Vision" drawings that are the "Eye Candy" for the project, and assembling pattern books that speak of architectural style and finishes that guarantee a high living standard for the entire community.

The zoning approval process no longer just involves dealing with the local municipality; it's become a negotiating event with numerous challenges. It now involves an endless series of meetings with Citizen Groups, Staff, Neighbors, Professional Citizen, and Commissioners. At times it feels as if you have to pay for the municipalities past sins.

The practical issues of selling the "Vision" start with measuring the level of knowledge of the staff, asking the question: Do departments speak to each other? As well as early on identifying with the town manager and zoning director. Then starts the task of getting a grasp on how the commissioners may stand on the issues brought out by your project. In meeting with each always remember that; 1) When speaking to Commissioners they are debating "How is it good for the Community," vs. "How it may affect their Public Image;" 2) When speaking to the Neighbors they are thinking "NIMBYism;" 3) When speaking to Citizen Groups they are focused on their agenda items; 4) When speaking to the Professional Citizens they are only interested in their 15-minute window on TV; and, 5) When speaking to Staff understand that their intent may be in line with the project but the final word comes from above.

Another aspect of the zoning approval process has become the Town Planners need to speak to all the issues (except legal). If there is opposition, don't be fooled to believe otherwise, the "Eye Candy" is overlooked and the Town Planner is expected to speak fluently the language of the consultants. It is expected to speak intelligently about

roadways, platting, drainage, flood plains, wetlands, concurrency, internal capture rates, ground coverage, tree species, palm species, and student counts. The Town Planner finds that to be respected, in the community he is practicing; he has to also be an honorary Civil Engineer, Environmental Engineer, Traffic Engineer, Landscape Architect, School Consultant, and Economist.

Lastly, depending on the scale of the project we find ourselves no longer just being awarded a project and presenting a design, but, in need of orchestrating public Workshops and Charrettes to come up with the design.

INTERACTION WITH CLIENTS

Today's growth management strategies demand that we retrain our clients to understand why they have to go beyond the requirements of the local zoning ordinance to get their project approved. We have come to know it as "Old School Politics" playing within the rules of "Next Generation Politics."

The role of the Town Planner has evolved from not just satisfying the client's program demands but also the local municipality and the challenges that are put up by other interested parties. The practical realities of being able to quickly respond and produce new designs we have found are greatly contingent on having a well stocked library. Our library has become our designer's source of inspiration and a quick method to explain the project potential to clients; it includes books, photos of places, case study projects and details, zoning reports, marketing material, and an extensive report on the sizes of residential and non-residential.

TOWN PLANNERS PERSPECTIVE

The dynamics of development today are no longer just conducted and approved in the commissioner chambers; they involve public forums and even web broadcasting. A typical development project today includes a team of specialist involving Local Landuse Lawyer, State Landuse Lawyer, Litigation Attorney, Lobbyist, Economist, Civil Engineer, Traffic Engineer, Environmental Engineer, School Consultant, "PR" Firm, Local Urban Planner, and the Town Planner/Architect. With every new development project that is brought to us, in today's environment, it is like preparing for another mission impossible episode. Remember, to be successful, it's a team effort.

So, "Who's on your team?"