

# Diagnosing Your Community *Before* You Plan

by Joel S. Russell, Esq.

“Prepare a comprehensive plan” is often the prescription planners suggest to solve the difficult development, conservation, and related problems that confront their community. But does it always make sense to undertake an exhaustive multi-year planning process that can cost tens of thousands of dollars or more, and may not even resolve the critical issues currently facing the community?

A useful first step — before preparing a comprehensive plan — may be to conduct a community “diagnostic study.” It costs far less, can be completed in a fairly short time, and can help get a handle on the community’s “hot button” issues. In addition, the diagnostic study will focus your comprehensive plan work when and if it is necessary. [See “Steps in the Comprehensive Planning Process” on the next page for more on how a diagnostic study fits into the overall planning process].

## A TYPICAL SCENARIO

The value of conducting an initial diagnostic study can be more easily understood by setting out the following scenario:

The Town of Exurbia, which has experienced only modest growth in the past thirty years, suddenly finds itself besieged with development applications. These projects, if built, will double the population in the next five or ten years and consume an area four times as large as the existing developed area of the town. The proposed development consists primarily of cul-de-sac subdivisions and strip commercial development.

The town is split politically between those who want to slow or stop growth and those who want to cash in on it. Since the current zoning allows most of this development (although it is inconsistent with the town’s current master plan), there appears to be very little that

the planning commission can do about these proposals, other than to approve them.

What should the planning commission do?

A CONCISE, ANALYTICAL  
“DIAGNOSTIC STUDY”  
OF A MUNICIPALITY CAN  
REVEAL WHAT NEEDS TO  
BE DONE BOTH TO SOLVE  
IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS  
AND TO CHART A COURSE  
FOR A BETTER  
LONG-TERM FUTURE.

## THE TYPICAL RESPONSE

The all-too-common response is to begin preparing a comprehensive plan. Yet by the time the comprehensive planning process is finished and it is time to write ordinances, many of the development projects (which triggered the call for better planning in the first place) will have already been approved, and the planning process will seem irrelevant. And by the time the municipality has paid for the comprehensive plan, it may have little or no funding left over to write new ordinances.

Some municipalities deal with this problem with a stop-gap development moratorium, which is at best only a partial solution and often exacerbates the polarization that already exists in the community.

Comprehensive plans also typically leave municipal officials with a laundry list of actions to perform and little sense of priority about what to do next. In addition, comprehensive plans, in an effort to achieve a fragile consensus, often avoid dealing directly with the

most critical issues and public concerns.

Moreover, if the state calls for municipalities to redo their plans every five years (as a growing number of states require), many communities end up having to revise their plan before they have implemented it. And guess what? The plans never get implemented and planning looks to the ordinary citizen like an exercise in futility.

Because “the devil is in the details,” drafting ordinances is almost always much more complicated and time-consuming than writing and adopting a plan. I am continually amazed at how many municipalities have done elaborate comprehensive plans and how few have effectively implemented them through zoning and public investments. The reason, I believe, is failure to diagnose the social and human issues that underlie the community’s planning problems.

The bottom line for a town like Exurbia is that its considerable investment in time and money in preparing a comprehensive plan may well have a very limited payoff in resolving its pressing problem of how to deal with a rapid increase in development.

## THE “DIAGNOSTIC STUDY”


Before deciding to dive into an elaborate and expensive comprehensive planning process, communities need to take a deep breath and ask themselves:

- Is a new comprehensive plan really necessary?
- What does the old plan say? Existing plans are often out-of-date mainly in their factual background sections, not in their planning goals.
- Have the objectives of the old plan ever been truly implemented through zoning?
- Will writing a new comprehensive plan deal effectively with the underlying social and political conflicts, or will it

avoid them by diverting attention to technical issues and formal requirements?

- Will the time necessary to prepare an adequate plan defeat the purpose of controlling imminent development? Or, will the whole process occur under so much time pressure that the plan will be prepared hurriedly with inadequate public involvement and/or recommendations that are based on insufficient analysis and thought?

- If a new plan is needed, is a five-inch thick document costing hundreds of thousands of dollars necessary, or will a more modest effort that is tailored to the needs of the community be sufficient?

A concise, analytical “diagnostic study” of a municipality can reveal what needs to be done both to solve immediate problems and to chart a course for a better long-term future. The community can take advantage of an outside consultant’s perspective by looking at itself with new eyes.  “Do You Need a Consultant?”

In my experience, a community diagnostic study is likely to be most productive if it includes the following basic steps.

**1. Paper Review.** The initial step involves a review by your consultant of all existing planning studies, plans, and ordinances, in order to get a feel for where the community is and has been, at least on paper. When I do a diagnostic study, I also ask for news clippings, position papers from developers and citizen groups, and other materials designed to illuminate the social, economic, and political context.

**2. Small-Group Meetings.** The next step is a round of intensive one-on-one and small-group meetings with knowledgeable public officials and people from different interest groups, including

*continued on page 10*



## Steps in the Comprehensive Planning Process

by Joel S. Russell

Every planning process is different, because it is tailored to the needs of the specific community. Therefore, not all of the steps listed below will necessarily occur, nor occur in the order listed below. One of the reasons for starting with a diagnostic study is to determine which of the other steps are really necessary, in order to make the best use of limited funds, time, and energy.

**1. Diagnostic Study (Needs Assessment):** Consists of interviews with municipal officials and knowledgeable citizens with different viewpoints to determine what the issues are, what is working, what is not working, and why. This is followed by an analysis of existing plans and land use regulations. The analysis enables the community to target its resources strategically at the most important of the steps that follow.

**2. Formation of a Planning Steering Committee:** Usually the committee is composed of representatives of different municipal boards and of citizen and other interest groups.

**3. Community Charrette:** This is a highly visible community event, often occurring over two or three days, designed to actively involve the public in setting goals for the future (also called “visioning”) and developing an action strategy to achieve them.

**4. Comprehensive Plan:** The plan uses the goals from the charrette as a starting point; and provides background information on demographics, economics, natural resources, environmental constraints, etc. The plan should include concrete action recommendations for changes in regulations, public investments, and private sector and voluntary actions to implement the community’s goals. Comprehensive plans work best when prepared as short, concise, and attractive booklets that can be easily used by the public and private sectors to guide day-to-day decisions.

**5. Revisions to Local Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances:** These are the specific changes in regulations that actually implement the comprehensive plan’s goals.

**6. Public Investment/Capital Improvement Plan:** This is a listing and prioritized budget

projections for public investments needed to implement the comprehensive plan’s goals. It should be incorporated into the municipality’s capital budgeting process (if there is one).

**7. Environmental Impact Statement:** Some states’ environmental laws require that the potential environmental impacts of the comprehensive plan recommendations and/or regulatory changes be assessed.

**8. Revision and Adoption:** Revising 4, 5, 6, and 7 above so that they form a set of complementary documents that reinforce one another; then adopting them together by official action of the municipality’s legislative body.



## Do You Need a Consultant?

Staff is usually overwhelmed with day-to-day reviews and other responsibilities and may have difficulty finding time to step back and look at the community objectively. A staff member may also be reluctant to jeopardize his or her effectiveness in ongoing relationships in the community by broaching those critical, but controversial, issues that often underlie the community’s planning process. A good consultant offers the advantage of fresh eyes, experience in many other places, and the ability to be open and candid.

Interestingly, a newly hired planning director might also be in a good position to do a diagnostic study, coming in with the advantage of a fresh perspective and the need to learn as much as possible about the community very quickly.



## The Planning Commission’s Role

The planning commission’s role in a diagnostic study can include being the contracting agency, helping to select the consultant, directing the consultant’s work, providing baseline information, documents, and maps, lining up different interest groups and individuals for the consultant to interview (including members of the commission), and providing a preliminary review of the first draft of the analysis.



## Who Participates in a Diagnostic Study?

It is important to understand that a diagnostic study is not an official document adopted by the local government requiring notice, hearings, and all of the other due process guarantees. It is a study performed (usually by an outside consultant) to provide advice and guidance that may lead to the formulation of policy or a public process for drafting and adopting a plan or regulatory changes.


The idea of the diagnostic study is to get a wide sampling of viewpoints, not to give everyone a chance to participate. Community planning charrettes and workshops are a better forum for such broad-based participation, and may well be recommended in the diagnostic study as a way to get the community more effectively involved.

Most people are much more candid in one-on-one or small group meetings than in a public meeting. The only way to find out “what’s really going on” is to have these kinds of informal, private discussions. The small group meetings are best set up with the express purpose of inviting a cross-section of the community. Another approach is simply to hold office hours and let anyone who wants to come in. This has the advantage of providing a more open process, but the disadvantage of having to pay your consultant to listen to Mrs. Smith complain about the potholes in front of her house.

After the diagnostic study is written it is a good idea to distribute it widely and provide an opportunity for any member of the public to comment on what it says.

## Diagnosing Your Community

*continued from page 9*

developers, business owners, citizen activists, environmentalists, etc. During these meetings, your consultant will elicit their concerns about how the planning process is actually working, what their goals are, and how well they think the process and regulations respond both to their needs and to the needs of the community at large.  “Who Participates in a Diagnostic Study?”

It has always been my experience that the way the planning system is portrayed “on paper” is but a pale shadow of the rich complexity and human drama that is occurring in the streets, living rooms, offices, public meeting halls, and fields, forests, and wetlands. It usually turns out that there are two very different systems at work: the “formal” one that can be read from the plan and the code, and the “real” one that is shaped by the different — sometimes wildly different — expectations, beliefs, fears, and hopes of real people, and by the friendships and rivalries that exist in every community.

3. *Analysis and Recommendations.* Your consultant should then prepare a concise written analysis of the key issues and conflicts within the community, as well as the areas where there appears to be substantial agreement. People often agree on much more than they might expect in the heat of social and community conflict.

You should expect your consultant to relate his or her analysis to existing planning and regulatory documents, and suggest areas in which these documents fall short in implementing what appear to be areas of agreement. Your consultant should also highlight the issues that need further research or public discussion before they can be satisfactorily resolved, and recommend ways to structure the resolution process.

The planning process that follows can then focus on better implementation of areas of agreement and resolution of issues on which the community is divided.

The implementation process for areas of agreement may be largely technical; for example, zoning code amendments (although the details often trigger underlying issues that are controversial). In contrast, dealing with the issues in controversy may require establishing conflict resolution processes, such as planning workshops or charrettes that include small focus group discussions, working committees in which different factions work together for a common understanding of problems and solutions, or special outreach efforts to “alienated” factions such as landowners, developers, lower income groups, minorities, or environmentalists (depending on the community).

The follow-up to the diagnostic study should be integrated with the formal requirements for comprehensive planning required by state statute. This may mean preparing a comprehensive plan update. When a new comprehensive plan is truly necessary, the diagnostic study helps provide shape and focus to the plan and minimizes its cost. Follow-up to a diagnostic study almost always requires changes in zoning regulations.

If the Town of Exurbia were to do a diagnostic study, its officials might find out that the major landowners are very nervous about losing their development rights, while many concerned citizens are terrified that their community will be overrun with the sprawl and strip



## On-Line Comments

“I agree with Joel Russell that the comprehensive plan is not the way to solve a ‘hot’ issue. What I don’t want to lose sight of is the importance of a *continuing* comprehensive planning process. And I emphasize process. Even that won’t avoid all the hot issues, but the process will provide a starting point to address them. And a lot of learning takes place if there is a good comprehensive planning process ongoing. ...”

—Jim Yarbrough,  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

development permitted by their zoning ordinance. This might lead to a conflict resolution process among these landowners, public officials, and concerned citizens, followed by some minor master plan amendments and more significant zoning changes. These zoning amendments might allow a wider range of development options in exchange for meaningful preservation of open space and adoption of design guidelines to maintain community character.

This targeted effort and outcome might be accomplished for, say, a total of \$30,000 to \$40,000 (including, perhaps, \$7,000 for the diagnostic study) without expensive litigation. In contrast, a complete comprehensive plan rewrite, followed years later by zoning revision and then litigation, might cost ten times as much and do nothing to manage the original development proposals that gave rise to the comprehensive planning process.

#### SUMMING UP:

The growth of comprehensive planning requirements imposed on local governments by state legislation has resulted in more resources going into local and regional planning, mainly in the form of comprehensive plans and similar documents. Yet with this comes the danger that too much time and money will be spent satisfying the formal requirements for studies, plan elements, functional plans, area plans, or regional plans. While these requirements can be useful for informed decision making, they require churning out large amounts of paper, often within unrealistic time frames given the public controversy that frequently accompanies land use decision making.

In these days of tight planning budgets and stressed municipal finances, it is more important than ever that planning dollars be spent as productively as possible. This means that they should be targeted where they will have the most impact solving real community problems.

Too many communities, however, simply hire a planning consultant and

end up with an “off-the-shelf” planning document that costs a lot of money and goes back on the shelf instead of producing concrete results. A little time and money spent up-front on diagnosing the community’s planning needs can save much more time and money in the long run. ♦

*Joel S. Russell, who authored “Rethinking Conventional Zoning” in PCJ #15, is a land use planning consultant and attorney based in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was the founding executive director of the Dutchess (NY) Land*



*Conservancy, and works with landowners, municipalities, developers, and land trusts on land planning, consensus building, and land use regulation. Russell would be glad to respond to any questions you have about this article. He can be reached at: Woodlea Associates, 28 Ward Avenue, Northampton, MA 01060; (413) 584-7228.*