Policy vs. Planning

By Ken Harwood

The newly formed Capital Area Regional Planning Commission (CARPC) is considering a broad new policy designed to control growth for the next 20+ years, while preserving farmland and natural areas. The plan would limit where communities could extend sewer and water with the intent of restricting new development to higher density neighborhoods and projects adjacent to existing service areas. The commission is correct in assuming that there is plenty of approved land already on the map. What they cannot control are the variables and people between policy and reality. Let me introduce you.

Joe Farmer: Joe owns 200 acres of land that is in the middle of an approved “urban service area.” He even sold the MMSD an easement to lay a sewer lateral right through his land. While selling it may make his family wealthy, he simply does not want to sell the farm and all the policy in place will not make him change his mind. “Call me in 20 years or so.”

Bob Lawyer: Bob has three Great Danes and wants an acre or two for them to roam. Instead he buys 100 acres of land outside an urban service area (at least for the next 20 years), which is now much more reasonably priced, just outside the city. The land should have been a park to protect the creek that runs through it. Instead, he pays Chemicals-Are-Us to maintain his four-acre lawn and complains about the deer. “Release the hounds.”

Jane Developer: Jane manages to get 40 acres of land in an approved urban service area. She plans a quaint little neighborhood with gingerbread homes and a beautiful park; the video features tree-lined streets and children playing in the fountain. Five years later, she has put up 800 units on tightly packed lots, the schools cannot handle the new students, the trees are twigs, and the park is a stormwater retention basin with a fence around it. “My costs were eating me alive.”

What will prevent the above scenarios is planning, not policy. By working together, community officials, CARPC, MMSD and the citizens of Greater Madison can create affordable, livable communities. We will have the option of creating neighborhoods, not housing developments. We will select areas for retail, manufacturing, office, residential, green space and farms that take into account both our values and growth needs. Policy creates a set of rules to work around. Planning, on the other hand, works.

Major projects

Monona is proving again that planning and persistence pay off. John Livesey is hoping to develop a four-story hotel, two restaurants and office buildings where an auto salvage yard now stands. The $20 million project named Whitehorse Commons is set to open in mid-2009. Monona is setting the standard for redevelopment with major projects that demonstrate you can raise the bar in even the most difficult environments.

Fitchburg and the town of Madison are converting two landfills into a business park. The Alexander Co. has unveiled a $120 million master plan for expanding its Novation Campus along Badger Road south of the Beltline and east of Rimrock Road.

T. Wall is pushing “New Urbanism” as he moves forward on two large projects, Verona’s West End and Middleton’s Tribeca Village. The challenge is, can you mix major retailers with small shops, office, residential units and public amenities to create yesteryear’s “Main Street USA?” I hope the answer is yes.

Retail

Sun Prairie continues on the fast track. Most recently Woodman’s announced plans for a location at Highway 151 and County Highway C. Verona may be the next boom town, but the plan commission and council have been very cautious in approving retail. The city will get a Farm and Fleet and T. Walls “urban village.” The West End. Other projects are seeking approvals.

Commercial/Office

UW is renovating five 100-year-old campus buildings, and three buildings built in the 60s are coming down. Alan Fish, UW-Madison’s vice chancellor in charge of facilities planning and management, suggests that the older buildings are actually of higher quality than the more recent structures.

Speaking of the UW, art students will get new space with an extensive remodel of an existing warehouse just east of the Kohl Center. The warehouse, known as the “Art Lofts,” can be found by following the faint smell of burning sage.

Homes/Condos

Veridian Homes has been named the 2008 Builder of the Year by Professional Builder magazine. The award is one of the most significant in the residential building industry.

In an interesting twist, Keven Metcalfe’s Water Crest Condominiums on Lake Monona are selling well, while Cliff Fisher, who is facing challenges downtown on the condo front, will develop a new 38-unit apartment building on North Butler and North Hancock. Both projects offer nice options for Madison living.

Interest rates continue to decline, and we should see slow but steady improvements in the housing markets.

Conclusion

I am glad that the Madison area has returned to a regional planning commission. I just hope that they consider projects on individual merit and fit in the community as opposed to compliance to an arbitrary policy — regardless of how well-intentioned.

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