



TERRENCE WALL

1950's planning – at its worst

If you own land in an area that a city has selected for a neighborhood plan, and you don't know what that means, I recommend finding out.

Since this column is supposed to be about my personal experiences at the intersection of business and politics, I'd like to describe my recent experience with the planning "process" on Madison's East Side.

Over a year ago, the City of Madison began the process of writing a neighborhood plan for the Pumpkin Hollow area – sandwiched between the Interstate and Sun Prairie, with Token Creek Park located on the north side. (I have 138 acres under contract in this area.)

Before any zoning or platting can be considered, a neighborhood plan must be completed, and so, a city staff planner was assigned to write one – which involves considering the land's attributes and liabilities, and holding public meetings.

Unfortunately, the process got off to a bad start with the city's selection of a planner whose experience is under the old zoning code. That code called for a separation of uses; i.e., keeping office and retail and residential uses separate from each other.

Such 1950's two-dimensional thinking is what created the suburbs and office parks where you have to get in your car every time you need something – and is now recognized by many alders and the Urban Land Institute as "bad planning."

In addition, the city planner ignored the natural assets and liabilities of the land. On his plan, he located low-density housing, including single family homes, near the Interstate system – which, under state law, would require a noise barrier wall (which will, of course, quickly will be graffitied).

Likewise, he planned these homes

directly under an airport runway. Years ago, the airport spent considerable money to purchase expensive noise easements from homeowners adjacent to the airport.

Added to that, the planner drew in three miles of roads on a mere 138-acre site. That's 23 acres of roads, and many of these roads (drawn on a two-dimensional piece of paper) crossed a steep (>20%) slope – in spite of a city ordinance prohibiting roads of greater than 10% grade. (In fact, the planner refused our repeated offers to take him on the site so that he could see the site's physical attributes first-hand and avoid such mistakes.)

Likewise, just when the city elected officials are saying they don't like dead-end roads, this planner deliberately cut in half an existing road simply to deny access to Token Creek Park.

This location on the Interstate is also recognized on approved city documents as a possible location for an interchange, but the planner took it upon himself to not recognize prior city approvals.

What's so frustrating is that the planner held the usual 'public input' meetings and then simply ignored the input he received. There truly was no 'process'; the planner just drew up a plan that he alone liked – which is a common complaint during the "neighborhood planning process."

Solving the Problem

Creating horizontal pockets of uses separated by artificial lines on paper is not what consumers want anymore. Instead, uses should be mixed; office above retail or multi-family above retail, or even senior housing mixed in with a medical center, for example, where the seniors can easily access medical care.

All the latest new urbanism planning calls for mixed-use, higher densities and

more pedestrian-oriented development.

In order to achieve that, larger tracts of land need to be maintained contiguous, instead of being sliced into 'vener' parcels like the city did with the Thompson Drive neighborhood, where crime is a result of design.

Likewise, the fundamental attributes of the land need to be considered, including its assets – such as the slopes and the creek, adjacency to a public park – and a site's liabilities, such as the noise from the Interstate and the airport.

At a time when Sun Prairie is putting in one million square feet of retail (almost equivalent to East Towne Mall) just down Hoepker Road, the city should be trying to maintain some contiguous land adjacent the Interstate for a major corporate headquarters – a place where the next TomoTherapy or Epic could be located.

Why are we letting old-school planning stand in the way of planning for Madison's next tech company success? The city continues to bleed technology companies because of the lack of prime sites available that could accommodate their rapid growth.

This is the city's last chance on the East Side; let's not blow it.

Stayed tuned next month – the city is starting new initiatives that may improve things.

Business Tip of the Month: *For new jobs, create a profile of the experience, education, skill set and personality type that is needed – and then use a personality test to match candidates against the profile. A good 'fit' means long-term success.*

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