

Local Government Planning Agencies and the Community

The Planning Process, as related to communities in general and Community Parks and Recreation Planning, in particular, is a process of searching, testing, learning and developing actions.

It must begin and proceed in the context of time, the setting and the needs and considering what is known, what is not known and what can be learned.

The process cannot be carried out through simple, routine operations and tasks. A major part of a community's planning needs to be "comprehensive planning or master planning." This idea recognizes that various aspects of community life interconnect, that economics, values, physical arrangements and social structures are all woven through the fabric of the community.

Comprehensive planning, however, does not require that everything be taken into account at all times. It does mean that when any one element is under consideration, it is thought about and investigated in the context of the whole community.

Although planning may focus on a particular part of community conditions, it is recognized that, in real life, actions in one area are not detached from the others.

Several are going on in various ways within city government and its various boards or commissions; non-profit organizations in the area; County government boards and commissions; joint ventures among school districts and state government agencies, like "Caring Communities" or "CHART"; private ventures through churches, athletic leagues or tourism and cultural heritage interpretation organizations plus Chambers of Commerce and numerous other community improvement entities (some strictly private but increasingly public/private entity mixes). There are other examples of community planning and local government involvement.

The structure of local governments tends to get more complicated. New commissions and agencies are frequently added to the organization of local governments. Citizens and public officials are pressed toward improving their abilities to control and properly use the complicated structures of government that democratic values and the circumstances of modern living have created. That requires effort and involvement in a constant process of planning, evaluating and adjusting the functions of local governments.

In order for planning to be effective in a community, all the following may be necessary:

- Studies and plans expressed on paper
- Funds and programs available from external resources
- Opportunities for knowledgeable people to get their ideas across, and

- A means to get projects and recommendations of special interest groups evaluated as they relate to the whole community.

None of these constitute the purpose of planning, however. The purpose of the official planning operation is to improve the community's ability to a) adapt to the expected, b) create the desirable c) avoid the undesirable and d) deal with the unexpected simply because we are comfortable with the process of planning.

In American communities, experience indicates that this is practical only when there is broad involvement in the planning process. The talents, energy and knowledge of trained professionals, governmental officials and citizens are all necessary in the planning process. Planning, to be practical, must be a joint enterprise among many different kinds of people.

In the end, elected and appointed officials must answer to the public the following questions regarding what is ultimately implemented: What are the costs? What are the benefits, Who pays? And Who benefits?

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