



WINDS OF CHANGE: Adapting Our Communities to the Changing Realities of the 21st Century

This is a summary of a presentation made by Don Weden, retired Principal Planner, Santa Clara County Planning at the Los Altos Community Center on November 17, 2009 at an event sponsored by GreenTown Los Altos. Contact: w e d e n @ i x . n e t c o m . c o m

Most of the “Suggestions for Successful, Responsible Planning” included with this summary, were not specifically addressed in the November 17th presentation.

INTRODUCTION

1. We are entering a period in which we will be experiencing major new changes and challenges, much bigger than and very different from those we have been accustomed to dealing with
2. To enable our communities to thrive under the new conditions these changes and challenges will bring, we need to:
 - a. Anticipate and understand the coming changes, and
 - b. Prepare for them
5. Upcoming general plan reviews and housing element updates provide an opportunity to begin to make these necessary changes
6. Conventional planning approaches may be inadequate to deal with major changes
7. We will need to become better at building public support to overcome resistance to change (see attached supplement)

SUMMARY

1. We face major changes and challenges in the coming years driven by the “winds of change” (i.e. major demographic, economic, and environmental conditions)
2. Meeting these challenges will require significant adaptations in our land use plans and policies
3. **How and where we house our future population will be of critical importance**
4. We need to plan to become intelligently more urban
5. **THE “WINDS OF CHANGE”**
 1. We face major changes and challenges in the coming years driven by the “winds of change” (i.e. major demographic, economic, and environmental conditions)
 2. Many of these changes will be “structural” rather than “cyclical”, meaning that we will need to adapt to them, rather than simply wait for conditions to return to “normal”
 - a. When structural changes occur, conditions generally don’t return to the previous “normal”
 - b. Examples of structural change include the replacement of the horse and buggy by the automobile; replacement of the typewriter by word processors and computers

Note: Our economy is currently experiencing very challenging conditions. But as we plan the future of our communities, we must do so based on a belief that more prosperous times will eventually return. And with them, are likely to come a return of the rising energy costs and home prices we were experiencing just a relatively short time ago.

- c. Global warming, for example, is bringing about a structural change in our climate
- 3. Among the major “winds of change” that will be significantly impacting our lives and our communities over the coming years are:
 - a. Population growth
 - b. The aging of the Baby Boom Generation
 - c. Global warming
 - d. Rising energy costs
 - e. Rising food costs
 - f. Global economic competition
 - g. The potential for a major natural disaster
 - h. Public health
 - i. Water supply
- 4. While all of the diverse forces listed above may seem unrelated, they are linked by the fact that they will all be impacted – for better or for worse – by the cumulative impacts of the decisions our local governments make regarding how and where we house our future population
- 5. Among the changes and challenges we will be facing are:
 - a. California’s population is projected to grow over the next several decades by the equivalent of adding another City of Los Angeles every eight years (think “LA 8”)
 - b. Over the next 25 years, the Bay Area’s population is projected to grow by the equivalent of adding two more San Jose’s
 - c. By 2030, one out of every five residents of the Bay Area will be age 65 or older – a significant percentage of whom will be non-drivers, in a region where there currently are relatively few viable alternatives to the automobile for most residents
 - d. The era of cheap oil, which has been the foundation for our suburban land use patterns and lifestyles, is coming to an end
 - e. Achieving California’s goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to combat

global warming will require, among many other things, that we reduce total vehicle miles traveled below current levels – at the same time that our state’s population is projected to increase significantly

- f. A variety of conditions may continue to force food prices upward

ADAPTING OUR COMMUNITIES

1. We will be facing major structural changes and challenges over the coming decades
2. These changes will require major adaptations by our local communities, and particularly in our land use plans and policies
3. Making some of these necessary adaptations may take many years to plan and implement
4. We need to get started as soon as possible in planning for these changes and implementing these revised plans
5. Being “built out” is not a legitimate excuse for communities not to make the necessary changes in their land use plans and policies
 - a. Healthy, vibrant communities continue to change and evolve, long after all their vacant land has been developed
 - b. We need to shift our focus from undeveloped land to reusable land – it’s just another form of recycling that is critical to the long term sustainability of our communities

THE NEED TO BECOME INTELLIGENTLY MORE URBAN

1. We are at a critical transition point between being predominantly suburban communities to becoming somewhat more urban; we need to make the transition successfully and intelligently for our sake and for the sake of future generations
2. We need to plan to become intelligently more urban by:
 - a. Focusing on livability – not just density
 - b. Focusing on placemaking – not just planning

- c. Creating great neighborhoods – not just building good individual projects
 - d. Focusing higher densities – not scattering higher densities
 - e. Mixing compatible land uses – not separating land uses
 - f. Planning for people – not just planning for cars
 - g. Increasing housing and mobility choices – not limiting choices
 - h. Protecting and enhancing existing neighborhoods – not threatening existing neighborhoods
 - i. Putting traffic into its proper perspective – not letting it dominate decision making
 - j. Planning for diversity – not exclusivity
 - k. Allowing for community-by-community customization – not one-size-fits-all solutions
 - l. Making it easier to get good development approved – not treating all development proposals the same
3. A primary focus of becoming “intelligently more urban” needs to be the creation of livable, green, urban neighborhoods that are not only great places to live, but that help us meet the major economic, social, and environmental challenges we will be facing over the coming years and decades
 4. Livable, green, urban neighborhoods are one of the key building blocks for creating sustainable communities. Each of the three basic components is equally important.
 - a. The attributes of “livable” neighborhoods include, among other things, being:
 1. Convenient
 2. Safe
 3. Healthy
 4. Diverse
 5. Vibrant
 6. Nurturing
- b. The attributes of “green” neighborhoods include, among other things, being:
 1. Energy efficient
 2. Water efficient
 3. Waste/pollution minimizing
 4. Nature friendly
 5. Greenhouse gas reducing
 6. Sustainable
 - c. The attributes of “urban” neighborhoods include, among other things, being:
 1. Higher density
 2. Mixed use
 3. Transit oriented
 4. Walkable and bikeable
 5. Synergistic

CONCLUSION

1. Through our planning and land use decisions, we are creating a legacy that will significantly impact the lives of future generations.
2. How will future generations judge the wisdom of the decisions we will be making as we update the Housing Elements of our cities’ General Plans – and in some cases, revise the entire General Plans, or prepare specific plans for selected areas of the city?

A LETTER TO CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE

“Dear Children of the Future,

In 2009, we could foresee major demographic, economic, and environmental changes that would dramatically affect the world you would inherit from us.

Knowing that these changes were coming and would greatly affect your lives, we chose to plan our city so that _____.”

How would you complete the rest of this letter?

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL, RESPONSIBLE PLANNING

A Supplement to the “Winds of Change” Presentation

INTRODUCTION

1. Local land use planning has never been more critically important
2. The magnitude and nature of the changes and challenges we are beginning to experience, and will continue to experience over the coming decades, are unlike those we have had to address in the recent past
3. Conventional planning approaches may be inadequate to deal with the major changes that are rapidly coming our way
4. Planners face unprecedented challenges and the need for a great sense of urgency in creatively organizing and conducting their communities’ planning activities to deal responsibly and successfully with these changes

significantly revise the plans they adopt – during which time the “winds of change” will have continued to blow and the challenges our communities face may have become even more difficult, if the plans we adopt now prove to be inadequate

SUGGESTIONS

1. To improve the potential for local planning activities to achieve responsible, successful outcomes, the following suggestions are offered:

a. Suggestion #1: Recognize the critical importance of upcoming planning opportunities

1. The planning and land use decisions made within the next few months – particularly through local housing element updates, general plan reviews, and specific plan preparations – will play a major role in determining whether or not our communities are adequately prepared for the major changes that are rapidly reshaping our world
2. Once this current “window of opportunity” closes, it may be another decade or more before most communities will again review and

b. Suggestion #2: Focus the community dialogue on future needs, not just current wants

1. Although, in theory, planning projects are supposed to be about the future, the reality is that many of them are essentially dialogues about the present that reflect current community wants, rather than future community needs
2. In the past, when most changes were cyclical in nature (i.e. things would eventually return to “normal”) and didn’t require significant adaptations, the distinction between current wants and future needs was not necessarily very important. Consequently, it didn’t particularly matter if the outcomes of many planning projects resulted in relatively minor, incremental changes, instead of major ones.
3. But in a time of major structural changes (where conditions aren’t going to return to “normal”), failure to base local planning on future needs rather than current wants can have serious negative consequences for the community.
4. This distinction between the community’s short term current wants and its long term future needs can also be quite relevant when it comes to the review of individual land development proposals. Often, for

example, communities allow long term (and current) needs for more housing to be trumped by current wants to limit traffic, and, as a result, needed housing development is denied or substantially scaled down.

5. In a critical period when local communities are beginning to experience major structural changes, they need to be having serious, responsible community dialogues about how to adapt to changing conditions and meet future needs by becoming intelligently more urban for the benefit of both current and future generations.
6. Whether local planning projects become dialogues about current community wants or future community needs often depends on the first question that is put before the community as the planning project begins
 - a. Planning projects that begin by asking the traditional question “How can we make our community a better place?” generally elicit and stimulate responses that reflect current wants, rather than future needs, and are usually a significant impediment to achieving changes of a scale and nature necessary to effectively address structural changes
 - b. If we want our planning projects to focus the community dialogue on future needs, rather than current wants, in a time of major structural changes we should begin by asking questions such as: “How can we prepare our community to thrive under the coming changed conditions?”

c. Suggestion #3: Establish responsible success criteria

1. Traditionally, the criterion for determining the “success” of a land use planning project (e.g. a revision of a local general plan) has been quite low.
2. Often, planning projects have deemed successful if they simply produced a plan that:
 - a. Was somehow considered better than the plan it replaced, or
 - b. Would make the community “a better place.”
3. In a world beginning to experience major structural changes, the bar needs to be set much higher to determine whether planning projects are successful.
4. The basic criterion that planning projects should now be expected to meet is:
 - a. “Does the new plan responsibly and effectively prepare the community to meet the major changes and challenges that are rapidly approaching?”
 - b. If the revised plan doesn’t pass that test, it does a disservice to the community’s current and future residents.
5. In addition to the general criterion suggested above, there are other, more specific criteria that local land use plans should meet, including:
 - a. Will the revised plan result in a net reduction of total vehicle miles traveled, below current levels, while accommodating the community’s reasonable share of regional population growth?
 - b. Will the revised plan significantly increase the percentage of the city’s population that lives within

- reasonable walking distance of a mid- or large-size grocery store?
6. All of the above criteria (and possibly more) should be established very early in the planning process, to guide the plan's preparation, and to be used in evaluating the success of the final draft plan before it is adopted.
- d. Suggestion #4: Think big! Big challenges require big solutions**
1. In times of major changes and big challenges, modest, incremental changes in land use – as typically occur during times of cyclical changes – are inadequate
 2. To meet the serious, unprecedented changes that are rapidly coming our way, we need to plan for changes that are larger, more ambitious, and more imaginative than we might otherwise propose
 3. The professional skills, leadership abilities, and imaginations of planners throughout the Bay Area are about to be put to a very critical test – one that may affect the economic, social, and environmental well-being of our local communities and the region for years and possibly even decades to come
 4. This is a time when the words of Daniel Burnham are particularly relevant: "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood . . . Make big plans, aim high in hope and work."
- e. Suggestion #5: Build community support for change**
- a. Although we are about to experience major structural changes in the conditions impacting and shaping our communities, and will need to make significant adaptations in our land use plans and policies to prepare for and respond to these changing conditions, making these necessary adaptations will undoubtedly encounter resistance to change from within our communities
 - b. Whether resistance to change is simply an inherent characteristic within the human species, or whether it is a response to perceived threats to our individual self interest, it is a significant factor that needs to be addressed constructively as we prepare our communities for the changes and challenges that are rapidly approaching
 - c. Meeting our future needs will require more than simply proposing solutions (e.g. transit oriented development, affordable housing, etc.) to current and/or future problems – it will require overcoming or significantly reducing community resistance to changes in land use
 - d. Effectively and constructively reducing resistance to change needs to begin with an understanding of the basic reasons that people tend to resist changes in land use. Most often, it is because they don't see one or more of the following:
 1. The need for change
 2. The benefits of change (or the negative consequences of failing to change)
 3. The potential for change (e.g. they perceive their city to be "built out," and therefore unchangeable)
 4. The opportunity to influence change
 - e. Effective land use planning needs to responsibly and creatively address all of these reasons that people tend to resist change
 - f. Thinking in terms of a three-level "Why?, What?, Where and How?"

pyramid can also provide useful insights for reducing resistance to change and establishing the supportive community attitudes necessary to achieve major changes in land use plans and policies

1. The top level of the pyramid is the “Why” level (i.e. Why do we need to change our community?)
2. The middle level is the “What?” level (i.e. What, in general, do we need to change in our community?)
3. The bottom level is the “How? and Where?” level (i.e. How and where, specifically, do we need to make changes in our community?)
4. The pyramid represents a hierarchy in which each level cannot be successfully achieved unless and until the question on the level above it has been successfully answered.
5. We may currently be spending too much time trying to get people to agree with us on the “What’s” (reducing driving or making housing more affordable) and the “How’s and Where’s” (mixed-use, higher density development around transit stations) when most of the public hasn’t yet accepted the fact that there is a significant need to change (i.e. the “Why’s”).
6. In order to move forward, it may be necessary to move back up the pyramid to the “Why?” level of the pyramid and create a critical mass of community understanding and acceptance of the need for change, before seeking approval for the “What’s?” and the “Where’s? and How’s?”.
7. A very important element of efforts to address the “Why?” level

involves helping the community – and its local leaders – to see the critical links between our local housing policies and the major changes and challenges we are facing (including global warming, the aging of our population, the end of cheap oil, rising food prices, economic competitiveness, public safety, public health, etc.)

8. Unless and until we have made significant progress at the “Why?” level, it will be more difficult to achieve meaningful, lasting success at the “What?” and the “Where and How?” levels.
- g. To overcome resistance to change, it may also be helpful to point out to community leaders and the community the potential negative consequences of failing to plan for change, including:
 1. Future needs that will not be met
 2. Unaddressed problems that may be more difficult and/or more expensive to solve in the future
 3. Missed opportunities to improve the community
 4. Reduction or loss of existing competitive economic advantages
 5. Unplanned changes that will still occur – but without the benefits that planned change would have brought
 6. Reduced quality of life for current and future residents
 7. Unfulfilled obligations to others to address shared problems

