

Mr. Kresovich's editorial expresses an extreme, but widely held frustration with how Washington has responded to the growth that is an inevitable side effect of its prosperity. Planners often hear citizens expressing frustration with both sprawl and density. To those of us in the field, we see these as inconsistent desires, but average citizens do not view them as such. Average people have no problem being opposed to both sprawl and density at the same time. To most people, they are both various manifestations of a change management process that is not meeting their needs.

Although this article expresses the symptoms, the diagnosis is incorrect. Washington's problems with both sprawl and density are not the result of the GMA, but are the fundamental problem we are trying to manage. Growth is not a problem we can fix, it is a set of up sides and down sides that we manage. The article assumes that somehow planning created the problem and that the market, if left alone, would produce a better set of solutions. The central issue buried under the rhetoric is where does planning fit into the value proposition for land?

The point of view expressed in the article can be summed up this way:

The public interest is defined as the sum total of all consumer transactions. The public defines what they value by purchasing it. In the market, suppliers that produce value succeed and those that do not are soon out of the market. Therefore anyone who is currently producing in the market is *per se* acting in the public interest. The people who really know and understand how land use works are not the planners, but the developers who actually build things. They know what people want because they supply it.

Planners are idealistic and unrealistic utopians trying to impose their view of government as the uber-nanny on the rest of society. Planners interfere with this process and drive up the cost by making people purchase what neither the buyer nor the seller chose to include in the transaction. If only they would cease interfering, the market would produce what everyone wants.

This defines the conservative view of the development and is a point of view we need, not to dismiss, but to engage effectively.

Planners should do this by better defining how planning contributes to the value proposition in land. Here are some ideas for how to have this conversation:

1. Redefine who is a party to the transaction: In every development proposal, there is the home buyer, the builder and everyone else in the community that has to live with that development over its life. Planners exist to represent the interests of the everyone else. The everyone else has to live with it. The everyone else built the roads, the water plant and the school system that house depends on. The everyone else is a party to the transaction with interests independent of the builder and the buyer. The everyone else is who we, as agents of government, represent. They are where our authority comes from. If all we care to represent is our own individual, normative notion of what people want, we are in the wrong business. Good planners are in touch with their community.

2. Broaden the perspective on what bundle of values people are buying in a real estate transaction: When people buy a house, they are buying granite countertops, a big family room and other things you put on the MLS and show them when you show the house. They are also buying into a community and a neighborhood. Remember location, location, location? Planners produce and protect the location. Builders define the lot and the unit, we define its context. This is the role of planners. We are the systems integrator in the land development process. We define the standards to ensure that, when developers come and construct the individual components (the individual developments) they add up to something more than each development on its own. Our job is to ensure that each new development makes the community better for those that are here and not worse. The day after the buyer mentioned above closed the deal, they become the everyone else in the next transaction.

Ironically, the type of community that is touted as the solution we are all trying to get, is exactly the same type of community that the article decries as one planners are somehow imposing on the public. Problem is, without the authority of local government, you can't get there from here. When you have a thousand acres and are building a mega-development like Redmond Ridge, you can master plan it and create it from the ground up. When you are working in an existing community, with less land than that, the landowner does not have the authority to make context, you need the public sector to do that.

Planners should be more engaged in this process, not less engaged. For far too long, we were preoccupied with just making sure that any particular development was entirely insulated from anything on the adjacent property that was different. This is what created our pre-occupation with perimeter landscaping. Especially in an urban context, we need to pay far greater attention to how to connect complementary uses and less on how to separate incompatible uses. Developers can produce the raw value of an individual development, planners produce synergy.

3. Require more specifics from your critics: I was most disappointed with where Mr. Kresovich ended the conversation. All I heard from him was frustration. I did not hear a concrete alternative. It is not enough to conclude with "we must demand solutions." To play the game, you must ante-up a proposed solution.

The GMA started with a citizen's initiative. Twice since then, the public has soundly rejected a citizen's initiative to gut planning. Planners did not descend in a flying saucer with this thing. The market did not produce what the public valued, which is why they chose to intervene through the political process. It turns out what happens to that parcel next door, or down the road, or up stream really does create or destroy value. We tried the free market, general zoning approach and that did not work. We tried the one-fish-at-a-time, project-by-project approach. That did not work either.

Like most public decisions, or at least the ones that are done right, GMA was a compromise in which everyone got almost what they wanted. To get the deal, everyone gave up a little. Some tough issues got kicked down the road. Some residual ambiguity was left in the system. That's how public policy really works. All planners work with this kind of give and take compromise.

The GMA is controversial because land use in a growing region is controversial. The GMA did not create the controversy, the controversy created the GMA. Over the last 15 years, GMA became, not just the set of laws we live with, it became the word we use to describe the whole cluster of issues we are struggling with, perhaps imperfectly.

The central role of planners in this process is to craft proposals, to evaluate long-term public costs and benefits and to help broker the compromise. Once that is done, we are the ones who are the enforcers of the deal we brokered. We can talk about how to change it, and we do constantly, but dispensing with the compromise that is the GMA will not make the problems we started with go away.

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