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Evaluation

## COMMUNITY PLANNING IN BOOM TOWNS:

### Why It's Not Working Very Well and How To Do It More Effectively

Hans Bleiker

#### BOOM-TOWN PLANNING IS COMMUNITY PLANNING

Planning is something that virtually everyone does, not just planners. The individual who has ambitions, hopes and dreams for a career generally develops a plan, even if only in his/her mind, for how he/she can go about reaching that goal. This "plan" most likely includes such elements as:

1. the nature of the knowledge, skills or other requisites that will be needed;
2. where or how that knowledge and those skills can be acquired;
3. how this education can be financed;
4. how other maybe more personal goals can be satisfied while pursuing career goals,
5. etc..

It appears to be inherently human to try to imagine the future—in fact, to imagine alternative futures—and to then pursue that course of action which is thought to serve us best. Jacob Bronowski, in his *The Ascent of Man*, put it thus:

*Art and science are both uniquely human activities, outside the range of anything that an animal can do. And here we see that they derive from the same human faculty: the ability to visualize the future, to foresee what may happen, and to plan to anticipate it, . . .*

Planning—in its various forms—is a very natural, ever-present, important human activity; it, indeed, is one of the more significant ways in which people differ from animals.

One should, therefore, not be surprised that, right along with all the other increasing specialization that has been introduced into our activities, specialized forms of planning have also been developed: community planning, transportation planning, economic development planning, criminal justice planning, planning for the aged, housing planning, land use planning, energy planning, career planning, estate planning, educational planning, corporate planning, air-quality planning, water quality planning, resource management planning, recreation planning, . . . etc.—and now, "boom-

town planning". The one thing that all of these different generic versions of planning have in common, regardless of their labels, is that *they all are aimed at solving*—preferably preventing—specific problems. They all constitute problem-solving efforts.

Boom-town planning is a special case of community planning. To do boom-town planning simply means to do community planning for or in a boom town.

### TO DO BOOM-TOWN PLANNING IS TO DO COMMUNITY PLANNING UNDER VERY DIFFICULT CONDITIONS

To do community planning in a boom town—more specifically: to do it successfully—is very difficult. The reasons for this are several and rather obvious; they can best be understood by looking at four major factors:

1. Our efforts in protecting and/or enhancing people's quality of life through community planning, even in our typical (not booming) communities, are embarrassingly ineffective.
2. The rapidity of growth and change that a boom town experiences, and which is at the heart of the concept of a "boom town", results in a continuous, relentless, unabated assault on many residents' quality of life.
3. Boom-town residents' attitude towards solving problems *after* they occur versus preventing problems *before* they occur naturally favors a certain amount of short-sightedness.
4. In spite of the fact that boom-town planning is about the most difficult kind of community planning that we ever attempt, we attempt to do it with totally inadequate planning resources—both in terms of quantity and quality.

These four major factors can be viewed individually.

#### 1. *Community Planning in General is Rather Ineffective*

Community planning in typical communities—including rural areas, small towns and metropolitan areas—is embarrassingly ineffective. The purpose of all responsible planning, in any community, is to solve problems. More specifically, planning occurs when either a serious problem is experienced or when some specific serious future problem is anticipated.

Even though all responsible planning starts this way, planners often forget what the actual problem is that should be solved. Once a planner loses sight of the fact that his/her only legitimate *raison d'être* is to be a problem-solver, he/she gives the appearance that he/she is planning for the sake of planning.

Actually it is not enough that a planning effort be aimed at solving specific problems. For community planning to be a legitimate governmental enterprise by a responsible public agency—whether at the municipal, county, regional, state or Federal level—it has to address a problem that constitutes a significant threat to the quality of life of the particular jurisdiction's

population. Responsible community planning, of course, does just this: it explores, develops, proposes and implements courses of action that are designed to protect and/or enhance the quality of life of the jurisdiction's people.

Community plans that do not address actual, specific problems which threaten people's quality of life have very little chance of contributing anything constructive to a community and its people. Unfortunately, even in those cases where a particular community planning effort does address an actual, specific problem which in turn does undermine people's quality of life, a remarkably poor record of really solving the problem is at hand. That is a fact. For planning professionals who have been giving it their "all" for many years, it is an embarrassing fact of life—a downright disturbing fact of life—but nevertheless a fact of life.

Observations about community planning and its effectiveness lead one to agree with the assertion that planning in our typical communities is embarrassingly ineffective in protecting and/or enhancing people's quality of life, and one should find it quite understandable and certainly not at all surprising that the track record of community planning in boom towns is not better than the track record of community planning elsewhere.

## 2. *Boom Town Residents' Quality of Life is Under Continuous, Relentless, Unabated Attack*

Human beings can adjust to almost any change, provided the change comes gradually enough. The corollary to this observation is just as true, and it, of course, lies at the heart of all boom-town problems. Very rapid change, brought on by very rapid community growth, tends to stress the people's various support systems; it creates a great many problems for them, and it has the overall effect of assaulting their quality of life from many different directions simultaneously and continuously.

An individual living in a boom town is likely to find that the social, economic, institutional, cultural, and even physical frames of reference are all changing at an incredibly fast pace making it confusing, if not threatening. Some of the essential personal needs that were still being met yesterday are no longer being met today. Should one manage to figure out some new, adaptive way to meet those needs today, chances are that by tomorrow he/she will be faced by a still different situation. Adaptability soon is outpaced and overwhelmed by the rate of change that is taking place.

The fact that the rapidity of change in a boom town creates a lot of problems for individuals, groups, corporations, institutions and government does not mean that community planning should have particular difficulties. Quite the contrary should be true. There very definitely are serious problems in a boom town. Community planning can at least potentially really show its stuff. After all, if planning means problem-solving, then planning should really thrive in an environment, such as a boom town, where there are a lot of problems.

However, since community planning falls considerably short of solving all the problems that significantly diminish the quality of life in typical communities, i.e., in relatively slowly changing communities, we should not be surprised if community planning falls far shorter of making its full potential contribution in boom towns.

### 3. *It Is Quite Natural for Boom-Town Residents to be More Short-Sighted Than the Rest of Us*

An honest look at ourselves as a society suggests that, in spite of man's rather wondrous ability—in Bronowski's words—"to visualize the future, to foresee what may happen and to plan to anticipate it," we tend to fall terribly short of really harnessing this fantastic, innate ability.

Extremely painful problems are allowed to develop which, with the benefit of hindsight, would readily have been prevented had there been a little more use of our cerebral planning faculties. The author's assessment of actual community planning efforts, relative to what is actually achievable, is that planners' vision and foresight rank them somewhere between being blind and distorted. The willingness to accept responsibility and the resolve to execute those responsibilities can fairly be described as a complicated mix of malfeasance, cowardice and confused indecision. This is only a slight exaggeration of the typical decision-making environment in which community planning is expected to solve any and all major problems that seriously diminish people's quality of life.

If the author's assessment of typical community planning efforts is even half-correct, one should not be surprised if community planning so often falls far short of making its full potential contribution to protecting and/or enhancing people's quality of life. Boom-town residents, for rather obvious reasons, are predisposed to be even more short-sighted than the rest of us. If our general tendency toward blindness and lack of resolve to accept responsibility diminishes our planning effectiveness, i.e., problem-solving effectiveness, then the pressures and incentives that are inherent to a boom-town situation only serve to further aggravate an already very serious problem.

The attitude toward planning in boom towns, quite naturally, favors a certain amount of short-sightedness. Most boom-town residents, and particularly its leading citizens and decision-makers, experience, at least during the early stages of the boom phenomenon, a certain euphoria. There are jobs, increased sales of all kinds, increased development, lots of money—in short—prosperity. Although no one is completely immune from this kind of euphoria, residents of the typical boom town are particularly taken by it—and for good reasons! The reason for this is so well understood by the typical boom-town resident that he/she generally does not bother to verbalize it. Usually boom towns, not only go BOOM; they also go BUST! In fact, most of them are subject to violent cycles of very rapid growth and even more rapid decline. The human experience of these cycles, i.e., what the residents experience, are periods of heady, exhilarating economic expansion and prosperity, followed by devastating economic decline and poverty.

Although periods of devastating decline are almost certain to follow periods of rapid growth, the converse is not true. Bust "cycles" in boom towns quite often are not cycles at all, but they sometimes turn out to be fatal, final plunges. In the Rocky Mountain region we have many "ghost towns": Towns that once thrived with human activity, commerce and wealth now stand abandoned as mere skeletons of those once-thriving communities. They are left to weather in the sun with the wind banging around the open doors and windows of empty buildings. It is ghostly to see the snow and sand drifting through kitchens, parlors and bedrooms of an abandoned town!

Boom-town residents are not naive. They know that just as those ghost towns once were boom towns, so their boom town may also turn into a ghost town. They understand full well that their town is booming right now because of some fluke of energy shortfalls coupled with local energy resources; of national economics; of being strategically located for a major military facility, or any other fluke. They seem to know, which is not to say that they are necessarily willing to admit, that all it takes is some other fluke for their exhilarating up-cycle to turn into a devastating down-cycle. Anyone who has lived for even a few years in an area where boom towns have come and gone, such as the Rocky Mountain region, is surrounded by folklore, stories, ballads, history, as well as physical evidence that "boom town" only half describes boom town. One learns that a better label for boom towns would be "boom-and-bust towns". Furthermore, even though it is true that there generally is great prosperity for most residents during the boom cycle, it is really more relative prosperity than absolute prosperity. Boom-town residents have typically, before the boom started, been rather poor. There usually has been an absolute minimum basic economy; one that allows for an existence somewhere between subsistence and outright poverty.

Original residents' children, once they have grown up, generally have had to leave the area to seek out a living. Usually there simply have not been enough opportunities to stay in the area. Consequently, there has been an involuntary out-migration of young people. In migration has been virtually non-existent. Some Wyomingites claim that Wyoming was really settled by accident. The story goes that about the only people who settled here were the people whose wagon broke down on their way to Oregon or California. Once they managed to survive the winter in this rather inhospitable land, they found that one actually could eke out a modest living in the high plains; that, in fact, the area has an unequalled, though subtle, beauty. In short, the prosperity that is associated with the boom phenomenon is felt all the more in an area where people have all their lives had to struggle hard just to make ends meet. This is even true for the person who just moved from a thousand miles away to the boom town in pursuit of a job. He/she, most likely, has been out of work and needs—more than anything else—a job. It is not very likely that he/she already is prosperous, is struggling and is ever-so-glad that finally he/she has found a well-paying job.

What would anyone do if he/she were the typical boom-town resident, i.e., one who has had a hard struggle to make ends meet. All of a sudden there is tremendous economic expansion and prosperity, but there is a fear that this new-found prosperity is very fragile. It could disappear virtually from one year to the next. What would a person do? The understandable human response to this set of conditions is to make the most of the opportunity while it lasts! Yes, one would be concerned about the long-run problem, but only to the point where that long-term concern does not interfere with fully exploiting the current, perhaps short-lived, opportunities.

#### 4. *Boom-Town Planning is Usually Attempted with Totally Inadequate Planning Resources*

The resources that are relevant to doing successful boom-town planning fall into three categories:

- A. The *technical expertise* and know-how that is brought to bear on analyzing problems, generating solutions to those problems, and predicting the impacts that those solutions, in turn, will have on potentially affected interests.

- B. *The planning director's expertise* for serving as an effective and constructive inter-face between the technical analysts and the political decision-makers.
  - C. *The political decision-makers' sophistication and ability* to secure and use the best available technical advice on complex issues without surrendering their roles and responsibilities as decision-makers on policy issues.
- A. The *technical expertise* that is available to boom towns varies greatly. On the whole, availability of technical expertise is, if not a solved problem, certainly a solvable problem. Technical expertise usually can be secured from one or several of the following sources:
- The basic industry that is causing the rapid development is usually painfully aware that, unless the imminent growth of the community is reasonably well planned for, there will be very serious growing pains. They usually are prepared to provide or to fund—in whole or in part—the technical planning work that needs doing if they are approached in a responsible and constructive way. They generally are prepared to do this for two reasons:
    - (1) Once those quality of life problems that boom-town planning is supposed to prevent actually materialize, many of these problems are not only visited upon the residents but also upon the industry in question.
    - (2) Most corporations—though rather unashamedly having profit as their main goal—also want to be responsible quasi-citizens of the community.
  - As a rule, it is a terribly naive and rather distorted conclusion that, because the industry that is causing the boom is not taking the initiative of providing the technical planning expertise to the boom town, it does not care what happens.
  - The relevant community, whether speaking of the local municipality, the county, the region, the state or the nation, usually has so much at stake by doing effective planning in a rapid growth situation that the actual cost of doing the technical planning work—though not trivial—is about the best investment it can make. After all, the alternative to doing the planning that could prevent community problems is to allow those problems to first materialize and to then try and solve them. The old saying that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is true. In fact, in the case of boom-town planning, the leverage of investing in prevention versus investing in a cure probably is more like: “A penny’s worth of preventive planning is worth a dollar of cure.” Of course, no matter how true this is, planners have to be willing and able to argue this point in such a compelling way that not only they but also the community at large understands it.
  - Universities and other centers of technical expertise are generally not only ready to be used; they are downright eager to somehow be used by boom towns. They are eager to address important real-world problems. They want to help boom towns predict and analyze their future problems; to help them develop solutions for these problems, and to try and predict what the various consequences and impacts of alternative courses of action would be.

Just because technical expertise is, generally, available does not mean that it is actually brought to bear in each boom town. Even though some of the most sophisticated analytic resources are available or at least are recruitable for working on boom-town problems, this in no way means that practical, workable solutions can readily be developed for all of a boom-town's problems. The social, cultural, economic, institutional and physical systems that are present in a boom town have all the internal complexities and complications of their counterparts in less quickly changing communities.

- B. Finding a *planning director* with the *expertise* to serve as an effective and constructive interface between the technical analysts and the political decision-makers is quite another matter. This is an indispensable planning resource for successful community planning in boom towns as well as in other communities.

Looking at the three major ingredients in the community planning process:

- the technical analysts,
- the planning director, and
- the political decision-makers,

one should be able to visualize the planning director's intermediary role between the technical analysts and the political decision-makers. The responsible planning director's most important responsibilities are the following:

- Makes sure that technical analysis surfaces and explores all major policy issues.
- Makes sure that these policy issues are put before the community in general, and before the political decision-makers in particular, in such a way that they—and not the technical analysts—make all major policy decisions.
- Makes sure that the planning effort addresses the most important problem—both present and anticipated—that significantly affected the people's quality of life. (This responsibility has obvious management implications. He/she has to propose a work program for his/her agency which will make sure that the limited budget is used to address the most important quality of life problems, so that all those things that remain undone at the end of the year are less important than the things that did get done.)
- Makes sure that the political decision-makers face up to—and deal with—all the really important planning issues in a responsive and responsible manner.
- Makes sure that the technical analysis is responsive to, i.e., sensitive to, the values of all the potentially affected interests.
- Makes sure that the whole decision-making process is accountable to, and does not violate, the community's sense of legitimacy, fairness and due process.
- Makes sure that the political decision-makers' need for popularity and short-term results does not unduly influence, control or in any other way interfere with the rigor and objectivity of the technical analysis.

One could go on describing the planning director's roles. The reader should, however, with the above outline have a pretty good sense of the nature of the planning director's desired "interfacing" expertise. The responsible planning director walks a narrow line between the rigorous technical analysis that is blind to people's likes, dislikes, hopes, fears, dreams, prejudices, hidden agendas, etc., and the community's actual political decision-makers and decision-making processes that may view the technical analysts' projections, forecasts, analyses, proposals and impact predictions as just another nuisance that might get in the way of doing what they would like to do.

To describe the successful planning director's most crucial skill in a nutshell: He/she has the expertise to get the community's decision-makers to make good use of the most rigorous available technical analysis in making decisions that affect the quality of life in the community; he/she helps the decision-makers develop informed consent among all the various potentially affected interests. Unless the planning director is able to make this happen, the plans that get produced, of course, cannot be implemented. Also, if they cannot be implemented, the problems will not be solved—they will, at best, be interesting "plans", "studies", "reports", "environmental impact statements," etc., that will benefit no one but the people who get paid for writing them.

The planning director's expertise is indispensable to successful community planning anywhere, not just to community planning in boom towns. It is a shortage of precisely this expertise that is the single factor that is at the root of community planning's general ineffectiveness. If many communities—even those with rather longstanding, extensive planning efforts—find it difficult to locate people with this kind of expertise, should one really be surprised to find out that boom towns experience the same difficulty?

The one place where one generally can find a really expert planning director is at the head of a very large technical staff, in a community with a citizenry that is relatively sophisticated in the use of experts and political decision-makers. It is rare, though just as necessary, for the smallest planning operation in a community that is not accustomed to making use of technical experts to be able to draw on a planning director's expertise.

C. The third of the three categories of planning resources is the *political decision-makers expertise*. The decision-maker's role, when executed well, includes the following kind of activities:

—Representation of the major interests who make up the community. (An "interest", in the planning context means any entity that has a value system, i.e., a set of likes, dislikes, hopes, fears, dreams, prejudices, etc., that is internally reasonably consistent. For any given problem or plan for solving it, an interest, thus, can be: an individual, a group of individuals, a corporation, an institution or a governmental agency which has a set of goals or values that is potentially affected by the problem or by one or more of the solutions in the plan.) They are also able to reflect the values of those interests which they do not directly represent.



- Understand and are responsive to the various value systems that exist in their community. They understand particularly well—and are totally responsive to—those of their community's values that have to do with:
  - What constitutes a "fair" decision-making process.
  - What issues or problems are legitimate subjects of governmental concern and action.
  - How equitable trade-offs can be made when an agonizing choice is at hand, i.e., a choice among alternative courses of action where every course of action necessarily imposes some hardships on some interests.
- Understand and appreciate the necessity of rigorous, unbiased technical analysis, especially when that analysis surfaces issues that are sensitive, controversial and unpopular.
- Understand and appreciate the planning director's crucial role in the successful community planning process and hire and fire planning directors with the uncompromising goal of obtaining the best feasible planning director expertise—as distinct from his/her technical expertise—for the community.

It is really an over-simplification to discuss the three kinds of planning resources, i.e., the different kinds of expertise of: the technical analysts, the planning director and the political decision-makers in terms of having one but not the other because all three of them exist, in some minimum quantity, in every community. If one wants to see just how crucial and indispensable quality expertise in these three different areas is, the order of importance is quite obvious:

1. To have *political decision-makers* who fulfill their various roles in the community planning process well is of the highest priority. If they do their job(s) poorly, the best technical analysis is useless, and a responsible planning director must try to get the decision-makers to face up to their responsibilities; failing that, he/she must resign.
2. To have a *responsible planning director* is next in importance. Even though he/she is no substitute for responsible political decision-makers, his/her expertise must include helping the community in general, and the political decision-makers in particular, face up to their responsibilities. This may mean taking up unpopular issues.
3. *Rigorous technical analysis* is indispensable to successful community planning. But, unless the other two kinds of expertise, i.e., that of the political decision-makers and that of the planning director, are of a reasonably good quality, technical analysis is not only a wasted effort—it is really counter-productive. The reason it is counter-productive is that it gives the appearance of planning. Studies are being done; plans are being developed; reports are being written; however, this kind of planning cannot and will not influence the actual decision-making.

To summarize the planning resources that are available to boom-town planning, one must make sure to keep one's feet on the ground of reality and not float away into an artificial, ivory-tower world of ideal conditions. This can best be done by simply comparing each of the three kinds of planning resources available in the typical boom-town planning effort with that available in the typical non-boom-town community planning effort. With the possible exception of the technical analysis expertise, the planning resources

available to boom towns are almost universally inferior in quantity and quality to the planning resources that are available to our more typical community planning efforts. As if that were not enough, this is coupled with three other inequities that were described earlier:

1. Community planning in general, even where more and better planning resources are available, is embarrassingly ineffective in protecting and/or enhancing people's quality of life.
2. The rapid change that is characteristic of boom towns constitutes a relentless assault on boom-town residents' quality of life.
3. Boom-town residents, quite naturally, are predisposed to be a little more short-sighted than residents of other communities.

What is apparent with these fundamental inequities is a problematic planning situation which is not fundamentally different from the kinds of problems that haunt community planning in general—except that in the case of boom-town planning all of these problems exist in one single planning situation and virtually all of them exist in an aggravated, extreme form. That is the long and short of the boom-town/planning problem.

It is very important for people who work in or with boom-town planning to understand that the difficulties, shortcomings and frustrations that they are experiencing are not fundamentally different from the difficulties, shortcomings and frustrations that the people who are working with community planning in other more typical communities experience. One reason why it is important for them to realize this is that within this realization also lies the solution to the boom-town planning problem: *very good, well-done community planning will succeed not only in typical, slowly changing communities, it will also succeed in boom towns.* However, a boom-town situation is inherently a very unforgiving planning environment; planning errors catch up with a community planning effort much faster and with a vengeance in a boom town. The speed and vengeance with which planning errors catch up with you in a boom-town planning effort is unequalled.

The following is an examination of the community-planning process and what some of the most common errors are.

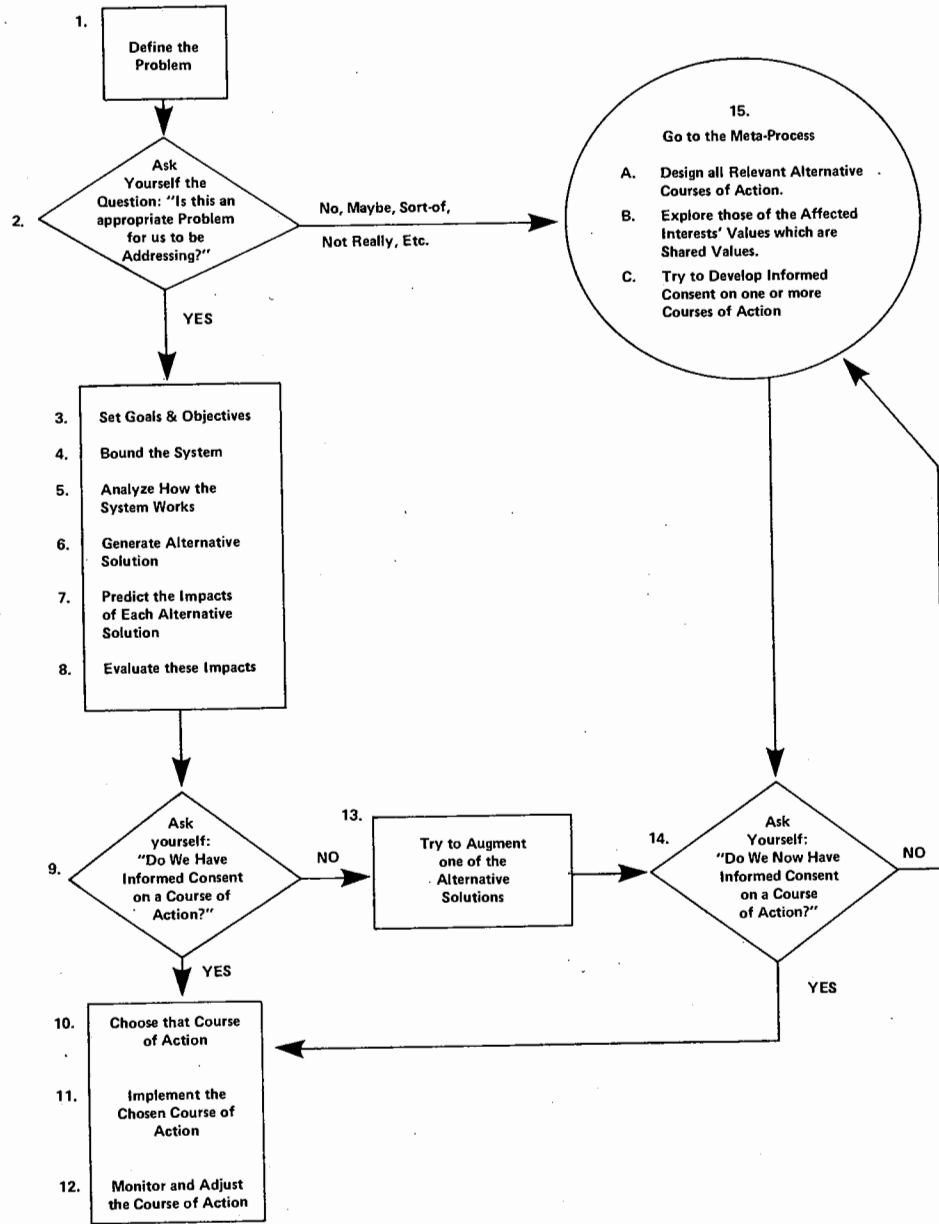
### FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN BOOM TOWNS IT HAS TO BE RIGOROUS, RESPONSIVE AND RESPONSIBLE

One must first define just what it is that constitutes success in community planning, in boom towns or elsewhere.

The only legitimate purpose to do any kind of public-sector planning, such as community planning, is to solve problems that significantly diminish or threaten the quality of people's lives. For such planning to be successful, it has to do several things:

- It must address specific, real problems, whether existing or anticipated problems.
- Relative to all problems affecting the quality of life these problems must pose a very serious threat to the quality of people's lives.
- The problem analysis has to be sufficiently rigorous to develop effective, feasible solutions.

The Augmentation/Meta-Process for Planning



- The planning effort has to be responsive to the diverse value systems, i.e., to the likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams, fears and prejudices that are held by the many different interests who are likely to be affected by the plan's proposed actions one way or another.
- The decision-making process has to be responsible, i.e., accountable, to the entire community of interests and to its sense of propriety, fairness and due process.
- The whole problem-solving/decision-making process must neither circumvent, nor be perceived to circumvent, the community's well-established legitimate political decision-making processes.
- The problem that was supposed to get solved has to get solved in actuality, not just on paper.

To discuss the ingredients of such a community planning process in any detail is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, individuals desiring this information should refer to books on planning theory and models, especially those detailing approaches such as the "Augmentation/Meta-Process" community-planning process.

### SUMMARY

I have suggested here that boom-town planning is not fundamentally different from doing community planning in other communities. More than anything else, boom-town planning means doing community planning under very difficult conditions. Also, since community planning even in slowly growing areas is embarrassingly unsuccessful, boom-town planners need to use a planning process that is rigorous, responsive and responsible. Boom-town planners, whether they are professional planners, other public officials or lay citizens, need and deserve all the help they can get; they have an extremely challenging responsibility. Even though they have a tougher job than their counterparts in other communities, they have fewer resources. Their job is so difficult; they cannot afford to make a single serious error in their planning.