

All Development Is *Not* Created Equal

by Edward T. McMahon

Has your commission ever been pressured to lower its standards under the guise of generating economic development? Do you have elected officials who think all growth is good regardless of the long-range costs or the birth-right of future generations?

A few months ago, during a workshop I conducted in Virginia, a planning commissioner told me that a national restaurant chain wanted to erect an enormous sign — more than double the size permitted by county ordinance — next to their proposed restaurant along the interstate. The restaurant developer had not so subtly suggested that they might locate their business elsewhere, unless they received the variance. What was my experience with this kind of request? he asked.

I responded by saying that a community's image is important to its economic well-being. The best places to live, work, and visit are those places that are willing to uphold their standards in the face of pressure to allow lowest common denominator development. The bottom line for most businesses is securing access to profitable trade areas. They evaluate locations based on their economic potential. If they are required to address local design, landscaping, or signage requirements, they will usually do so. They might prefer a gaudy 100-foot tall sign, but they will settle for the 20-foot tall sign everybody else has.

By chance I happened to have with me several slides of a restaurant from the same chain located across the border in Maryland. This restaurant had a low sign — and a full parking lot!

I later learned that the Virginia commissioners denied the variance request and that, despite its bluster, the restaurant had opened on time in the location originally proposed.

It is important to recognize that all

development is *not* created equal. Too many communities delude themselves into thinking that it doesn't really matter whether a project is good or bad, consistent with the local plan or inconsistent, so long as it produces jobs and tax collection opportunities.

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How often have you heard local officials express the opinion that imposing standards to assure high quality growth will scare away economic development? The truth is just the opposite. In his book, *Planning America's Communities: Paradise Found? Paradise Lost?*, Herbert Smith, the former planning director of Albuquerque, New Mexico, examines planning successes and failures in 15 cities and concludes that, "quality urban development, whether it is residential, commercial or industrial wants no part of an unstable, unplanned, uncontrolled environment as they know this is not a place to make a long-term investment."

A case in point is Denver, Colorado's, Lower Downtown area. Before it was designated as an historic district, it saw blighted conditions and low property values. Developers could build anything they wanted — but there was almost no private investment because there were no standards. After the area was designated as an historic district, it boomed. Small businesses and investors were lured by the area's historic warehouse buildings and by the knowledge that their invest-

ments would be protected by strong zoning standards.

Think about your own community. Imagine that it has developed an excellent comprehensive master plan, approved by the planning commission and endorsed by the governing body. The zoning ordinance was also recently reviewed and updated.

But now a developer, who has obtained an option on a large parcel at the edge of town, appears before your board and tells you that he has great news: the XYZ Company is considering locating there. All that is needed is a rezoning, albeit one that doesn't quite mesh with the recently adopted plan's policies.

"Think of all the new jobs and tax revenue this project will create," he says. "Your community is really fortunate," he adds, "but XYZ is also looking at sites in two other communities, so if we don't get a speedy rezoning, they may go elsewhere."

Scenarios like this are repeated in one community after another. Herbert Smith calls this "The Fable of Prosperity Shopping Center." It can be hard to say no to the promise of immediate jobs and development. But successful communities understand that when they say no to development that is contrary to the long-term health of their community, they will almost always get better development in its place. In the long run, all development is *not* created equal. ♦

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