



The Importance of People's Participation in Planning

Ron Miller, AICP
Executive Director, Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission

The following commentary explores the importance of citizen participation in planning as documented in the 1925 Comprehensive Plan for Cincinnati and as recognized today by the Hamilton County Planning Partnership. This commentary was presented on November 8, 2000 at World Town Planning Day, A Celebration of Planning in Cincinnati, sponsored by the Ohio Planning Conference, a Chapter of the American Planning Association.

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The 1925 Comprehensive Plan of the City of Cincinnati, a plan that we are celebrating today, and the newly initiated comprehensive plan of Hamilton County, have an important characteristic in common.

That common characteristic is the recognition of the importance of citizen involvement and support—a recognition that the effectiveness of a plan (its implementation potential)—is dependent on people's participation; dependent on a mandate from the people.

Our awareness of the importance of citizen endorsement has been heightened during the last several days as election commentators and historians continue to tell us of the possibility of having the American president elected by the Electoral College but **not** by popular vote. We know from history that the success of our president-elect can be limited without a mandate from the people.

Similarly, the 1925 City Plan states that “no plan on paper is fully effective until it becomes a Citizens' Plan. This means that the backbone of it must be the active and enthusiastic support of the citizens generally.”

75 years later, the HCRPC is initiating a comprehensive plan that is again engaging the support of citizens. This effort is being called Community COMPASS (Comprehensive Master Plan and Strategies).

While the planning effort is in its infancy, the process to assure that the planning effort will be effective is worth noting. Let me explain with a brief story.

Our request to the Board of County Commissioners for funding of this plan was fortunately met with resistance! You're saying: What! This guy is happy about not being funded? Let me explain.

While the Board definitely recognized the importance of having a countywide plan (i.e., having an update of the county's 1964 comprehensive plan), they also recognized that the value of such a plan is directly dependent on the extent of local commitment—the extent of ownership—by local communities; the extent of ownership by the 49 political jurisdictions in Hamilton County.

Rather than fund this plan and enable a top down process, the Board of County Commissioners challenged us to demonstrate local commitment (in both participation and

funding) before they would invest in any substantial long-range comprehensive planning process for the County.

To demonstrate the required local commitment, we convened representatives of the local jurisdictions to discuss this situation--the possibility of forming an effective partnership of the 49 Planning Commissions and the possibility of creating an effective plan for our county.

The political jurisdictions talked about and identified a collective need for:

- a partnership and a plan to bring together organizations engaged in community planning in Hamilton County so that mutual goals related to physical, economic and social issues can be planned for comprehensively and achieved collaboratively. This became the mission statement for the Planning Partnership.

The political jurisdictions also talked about:

- a partnership and a plan that can leverage the unique qualities found in every community--planning collaboratively to stabilize and protect our communities; collaborating, for example on issues related to population loss and disinvestment.

Our political jurisdictions identified a need for:

- a partnership and a plan that will maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of all planning efforts;
- an alliance--with a unified voice--that can leverage our collective bargaining power more effectively than the efforts of individual communities;
- a partnership and a plan that will ensure that local planning entities do not work against one another by implementing fragmented projects that hinder the effectiveness of development to themselves and their neighbors.

Our political jurisdictions have a vision of:

- a partnership and a plan for achieving more together. By working together, the 49 jurisdictions and other planning entities (in public, private and civic sectors) will accomplish more than they would individually, especially on issues that cross community boundaries;
- a partnership that can focus on problems and opportunities that can only be successfully addressed by the whole rather than the parts;
- a partnership and a plan that is responsive to the needs of the people living in each community.

These goals--this vision--has been converted into a Resolution of Cooperation that is now being considered by the 49 political jurisdictions in Hamilton County.

Already 20 jurisdictions, covering 60% of the County's area and 70% of the County's population, have adopted the cooperation agreement--an agreement to participate in, and fund the partnership and the comprehensive plan--and, more importantly, the continuous planning and implementation process.

Also, of significance in this process, is that the first endorsements of the Planning Partnership came from the Cincinnati City Planning Commission and City Council as well as the Hamilton County Commissioners. Imagine this--an early agreement between Cincinnati and Hamilton County! This, I'm sure will also be celebrated in 75 years!

I also must mention one other momentous recommendation contained in the 1925 Cincinnati Plan. The recommendation is not surprising given the various titles of this plan. Please note that the Plan (in various sections) is identified as:

- The Official City Plan
- The Metropolitan Plan
- The Comprehensive Plan, and
- The Comprehensive City and Regional Plan and Program

It's a City Plan that was--if not, certainly wanted to be---a regional plan.

It's recognition of the importance of regionalism is documented in Chapter 18—Immediate Program to Meet Deficiencies. It includes the following recommendation:

“Immediate steps should be taken toward the creation of a regional or county planning commission, as provided by law for the common planning of the whole region tributary to Cincinnati.

A regional or County Planning commission as authorized by the State Enabling Act of April 17, 1923, should be created at the earliest possible moment, and vested with the full powers conferred upon it by the act.”

As you can see, the idea of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission was conceived in the 1925 Official City Plan. The idea, the concept, the recommendation, was actually implemented in 1929 when the Regional Planning Commission was established by such notables as Alfred Bettman and Murray Seasongood.

This year (in the year 2000) the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission was officially reestablished with a new structure that includes the Planning Partnership.

The Planning Partnership is growing.

Its comprehensive planning initiative--Community COMPASS--is beginning.

And we look forward to your participation and support. Thank you.