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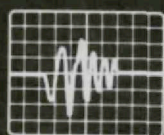
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Planning to Plan

Christopher Lappala

In 1913, the cover letter for a proposal entitled "Houston: Tentative Plans for Its Development" presented to the Houston Park Commission stated:

Special emphasis has been laid on the ways and means of carrying out the various phases of the physical plans, so that it may be possible to proceed without delay, and thus avoid the fatal hiatus which has so often come in the improvement of many American cities subsequent to the publication of the preliminary report. I sincerely trust that this deplorable tendency will not hold back the civic progress of Houston.

It's been more than 70 years since Arthur Coleman Comey, a Boston landscape architect, wrote these words. Now following what some observers see as a near-fatal hiatus, the Department of Planning and Development of the City of Houston is once again on its way to producing the ways and means needed for Houston to proceed with an orderly, but not rigidly controlled, "civic progress."

Many of the dire predictions made in Comey's report, as well as other studies, came to pass. Uncontrolled and explosive growth in the 1970s put a severe strain on existing infrastructure and utilities, with resultant traffic problems and growth restrictions based on the sewer-connection moratorium instituted by the Environmental Protection Agency (see "Trading Toilets: The Subterranean Zoning of Houston," by William H. Anderson and William O. Neuhaus, III, *Cite*, August 1982, 12). Houston was still a city of separate neighborhoods, with many problems occurring when independently developed areas grew together. This was all predicted in the 1913 plan, especially with respect to street grids, alignments, and thoroughfares. In the absence of a comprehensive response by the City of Houston to some of these problems of the mid 1970s, developers, planners, and area residents began to form area or neighborhood groups such as the South Main Center Association, West Houston Association, and the City Post Oak Association. Their purpose was to define problems and goals within a specific area, and provide a means of lobbying for various city services. It has taken several years for the city's Capital Improvement Plan to begin to catch up with growth. The new director of Planning and Development, Efraim Garcia, has seen this time as the opportunity to utilize what is existing in the area organizations' proposals and take advantage of the current desire for planning, as well as address immediate problems facing the inner city. For the first time in decades, not only the means, but the methods, are available.

The recently submitted city council resolution drafted by the Department of Planning and Development (formerly the Department of City Planning) differs from earlier efforts in several ways. Sixteen years after Comey's report, the Kansas City firm of Hare and Hare, also landscape architects, worked in association with the Houston City Planning Commission to produce a report which was submitted to the mayor and commissioners. In 1942 and 1959 other plans were produced, also prepared by the Houston City Planning Commission and submitted to the mayor and council. Among the ideas proposed in the first two plans were using the city's bayous as a linear park system; setting up a system of major thoroughfares incorporating separate transitways for street cars; and implementing height,

setback, and use restrictions for buildings and neighborhoods. Some of the suggestions resulted in development of Buffalo Drive (now Allen Parkway) and the Civic Center. This time around "... the Department of Planning and Development will undertake the preparation of a series of comprehensive neighborhood plans and the joint preparation with certain cooperating area associations of a series of comprehensive area plans."

The resolution gives formats and detailed guidelines for comprehensive neighborhood plans as well as comprehensive area plans. The neighborhood plans would focus on "... certain depressed neighborhoods. . . in the central areas of the City. . .," and would be prepared by the Department of Planning and Development. Area plans would be dealt with by existing and newly organized "... area associations with trained professional staffs that can function as an adjunct to the City's planning efforts. . ." In the latter cases, Planning and Development would help provide oversight, data, and coordination, and assign a planner to work with those associations that do not have the required staff or resources. The boundaries of certain area associations overlap, and it remains to be seen how these potential conflicts of interest may be resolved. Among the required information is: definition of area boundaries, with supporting data to justify these boundaries; existing social and physical conditions, including prior or scheduled expenditures of public funds; redevelopment analysis, short-term projections and assumptions, and long-term projections and assumptions. Neighborhood plans undertaken by Planning and Development staff will be divided into activity areas, with separate analysis of goals, potential for funding, and a ten-year implementation plan.

Since Planning and Development will have a major influence over apportionment of city services and the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), it will be in the best interests of the area associations (as well as area residents) to become actively involved in this process. One of the great advantages of this proposal will be to enable areas and neighborhoods to organize and solicit community input, and then pool resources and expertise.

One potential problem with the aforementioned process concerns the many areas of the city which will not be included in this process, for example, those neighborhoods not targeted by Planning and Development as "depressed" and those areas not included in the approved list of area associations. Although Phase II of the plan should include these groups, there is a very real possibility that they will be left out of the first round of CIP funding. Despite this potential problem, Garcia and the Department of Planning and Development are encouraging public participation, and the resolution does require community presentations while stressing community participation. The stated goal is to compile a "compendium of plans" that will be bound together as a unit. Garcia says, only partially in jest, the result will be to "sneak up on the city with a comprehensive plan." It is hoped that time and public interest will make this plan and the process usable for a city that up to now has eschewed public input and ignored the warnings and visions of earlier comprehensive reports. ■