

Pawtucket puts planning on TV

When the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act was passed by the General Assembly in 1988, the state became one of a handful of states that sought to bring order out of the chaos of development. The results of that legislation are slowly starting to emerge.

The original law stipulated that by the end of 1990, each city and town would file with the state a comprehensive plan which addressed nine elements. Subject to state approval to ensure compatibility with state goals and policies, the plans will allow communities to better deal with problems related to growth.

Fiscal constraints and problems of implementation in 1990 caused the General Assembly to extend the deadline for the submission of plans to the end of 1991. And to give communities the teeth to institute change, this year the legislature passed the Zoning Enabling Statute, a necessary and powerful tool that provides new and innovative zoning means for communities to achieve their planning goals. All communities must be in conformity with the new zoning regulations by July 1, 1993.

To comply with the comprehensive planning regulations, all communities must consider nine elements, starting with a goals and policy statement and concluding with an implementation program. The seven elements in between form the heart of the plan: These elements include land use, housing, economic development, natural and cultural resources, circulation, services and facilities, open space and recreation.

Since the key to good planning is to have citizens work with planners rather than simply accepting the plans of these experts, as was previously the case, communities have set up a variety of committees, workshops, presentations and other means to get ideas, suggestions and opinions from their citizens. Time will tell how innovative or traditional communities are once all plans are submitted.

To date, few plans have reached the state planning office, so little can be said regarding results of these planning exercises. But the process by which citizen planning is taking place and the communication of this process to the residents has been going on long enough to assess that work. Surprising to some, perhaps, because of its recent poor publicity, Pawtucket has come up with an innovative method of communication that other communities could very well emulate.

In a planning guide issued by the State Planning Division to help communities work on their plans, it is suggested, among other methods, that communities consider using cable television to communicate ideas to residents. With public access to free programming, the idea has much merit, and Pawtucket has seized upon the opportunity.

John Notte, assistant administrator for cable TV at the Public Utilities Commission, feels that too many communities have been too slow or apathetic to use this excellent means of communication, whether it be for the planning process or some other programs that have community interest.

Public access, according to Notte, means that each of the nine companies operating in the 13 service areas throughout the state will provide training, editing, use of equipment and air time, all without charge. In some cases, cable companies will also provide local origination or programming.

Some communities currently televise council meetings and other local activities. These programs are useful, but the opportunity to work on the future of a community through its planning process merits more attention because planning goals reflect a community's hopes and aspirations, and the comprehensive plan is the means to make them realized. So how to reach the residents of a community to explain these goals, hopes and aspirations can be a major problem.

Communities doing their comprehensive plans normally hire consulting firms to help them because local planners may not have the time or the expertise to put the whole plan together. The one consulting firm usually does the whole job, from doing surveys to running meetings and writing final reports.

Rather than hiring a consulting firm for the entire plan, Pawtucket hired a planner from Siegmund & Associates of Providence to coordinate the work being done by others. The company also worked on the topics of circulation and service and facilities. The city planning department worked on the elements of open space and recreation and natural and cultural

resources, but hired Albert Veri & Associates of Providence to do land use, housing and economic development.

These elements formed the basis for four hours of air time, repeated on several days during July and August on Vision Cable, the local cable company.

Working with a diverse panel of professionals for each of the seven segments together with a live audience that could also raise questions, each of the elements was questioned and discussed. The four hours of air time consisted of one hour devoted to land use, and one half-hour given over to each of the other six elements.

The airing of these programs has pleased planners and officials. Additional workshops and discussion groups will react further to the proposals drafted in the plan, and after comments and ideas are incorporated into the final copy, the plan will be submitted to the state for approval.

According to state planners, the only other community to avail itself of public access to its cable company is North Providence. Dimension Cable compiled a 15-minute program that explained a comprehensive plan and how it is put together. Useful for public meetings and as an introduction to the topic, it is more informational rather than a discussion of the essential elements of the plan, as was done in Pawtucket.

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