

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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The holidays give me a chance to catch up with people I haven't seen in a while. Perhaps the most compelling conversation I had over the 2009 season was with someone closely following the comp plan revision process.

When I asked him how things were going, he said “It's like we're on the Western Front in World War 1. Everyone is hunkered down in their trenches, lobbing shells and wasting lives. We're stuck in the mud, mired down, making no progress.”

“Sounds grim,” I replied.

“It is, especially because no one knows what else to do. We're in the middle of this thing, and everyone hates it, but no one knows how to change the dynamic. So they keep doing the same thing, and hope it'll eventually get done. And you know what's worse? It probably won't make any difference.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The planning commission process is just an elaborate Kabuki dance.”

“You're mixing metaphors.”

“I know, but I don't know what else to call it. When the planning commissions finally approve something, the electeds might pass it, or they might not. And if the planning commissions give them dreck, why should they pass it?”

“Well,” I asked, “suppose you were in charge. What would you do?”

“That's the problem. I don't know,” he replied. “I'm like everyone else. My only thought is to send more troops over the top, hope not too many get killed, and hope we gain a few hundred yards. Then I'd dig some more trenches and repeat the process.”

As I say, it was a pretty compelling conversation, featuring a pretty compelling metaphor. And as I've thought about, I realize the metaphor also works in a second sense, although fails in a third. Plus the jury's still out on a fourth parallel.

The other way the metaphor works is that the people launching both World War 1 and the plan revision thought their efforts would be over quickly. In World War 1, Germany's plan specified it would defeat France in 42 days; when the comp plan update process was launched in 2007, planners anticipated finishing it in 12-18 months.

Metaphors are usually imperfect, and this one fails in the sense that World War 1 was an unnecessary war. In contrast, the current land use plan and Land Development Regulations (LDRs) clearly needed to be addressed, for they were designed to be re-visited and updated at least every five years. Instead, it took three times that long, by which time the regulations were hopelessly out of sync with what our community had become. So, while people can legitimately argue about the quality or efficacy of the update process, there's no question the effort was needed.

Yet to be determined is whether the metaphor will apply to the aftermath.

World War 1 settled little, but took such a psychological toll on Europe that people went from referring to it as the Great War to, wishfully and wistfully, calling it the War to End All Wars. And while it's not clear what will happen once the current planning process ends, the precedent is not hopeful. As noted above, the 1994 plan and LDRs were designed to be updated every five years. Instead, the 1994 planning process was so traumatic that it took officialdom fifteen years to screw up the courage to revisit the plan.

Looking to the future, three things seem clear. First, at this point, only a fool would predict when the plan will finally be adopted, or what it will say.

Second, adopting the plan is only half the battle, for once that's done, the town and county need to address the second and arguably more important phase: revising the LDRs. As a result, it's even more foolish to guess when the entire package of new development regulations will finally be in place.

Third, getting back to the World War 1 metaphor, once the new plan and LDRs are adopted, we'll likely look back on this as the Planning Process to End All Planning Processes, and won't want to revisit planning for a long, long time.

Why is this important? Because if we won't be revisiting the plan for another 10-15 years, the plan and LDRs had better be flexible enough to adapt to the inevitable changes that will sweep over Jackson Hole during that period.

The 1994 plan was designed to be revisited at least every five years because officials recognized that Jackson Hole was growing and changing, and would have to adapt its land use policies accordingly. Despite these good intentions the 1992-1994 planning process was so difficult that, rather than revisit the increasingly unwieldy plan and LDRs, officials held their noses and stuck with what they had. Given how difficult the current planning process has been, that likely was the smart political move. From a planning perspective though, it was anything but.

Looking ahead, if the new plan and LDRs will be with us into the 2020s, we need to keep two things in mind.

First, if the plan is to last 15 years or so, it has to be super-flexible. Since 1994, Jackson Hole has become a very different place, and has done so very quickly. The current plan has barely coped with such change. If we'll be using the new plan for the next decade or two, it can't be tighter than the current one, and probably should be looser.

This leads into the second thing, the supreme irony about the current planning process.

Most thoughtful observers feel the new plan and LDRs should be tighter and more prescriptive than the current batch. Yet adopting tighter regulations is the right planning solution only if we're willing to revisit and the plan and LDRs on a regular basis. If we haven't been willing to do this during the last 15 years, why should we think we'll do it during the next 15?

Like it or not, the current planning process has become trench warfare, with barbs and backbites being lobbed back and forth between increasingly entrenched and hostile sides. This does not augur well for the possibility of regular updates to the new plan, which in turn has two powerful implications.

One is that, if we continue down the current path, the least worst outcome will be to enact a super-flexible plan, even if that's the outcome no one wants.

The other is that, rather than continuing to dump endless resources into endless reviews of the draft plan, officialdom should ask whether the underlying process is serving us well. Why? Because if the current

process continues as it has been going, the resulting fatigue, divisiveness, lingering animosity, and other long-term consequences could be far more harmful to the community's character than any word choice in the comp plan or LDRs.

And that's just the long-term threat. More subtle, but equally invidious, is the short-term threat, namely that the review of the plan is going to so drain and damage us that we won't have either the energy or comity necessary to do justice to the new LDRs.

One of the few hopeful moments of World War 1 occurred in both 1914 and 1915, when soldiers spontaneously created a Christmas truce. The opposing sides came out of their trenches to sing carols, exchange greetings and gifts with one another, and even play a bit of soccer in no-man's land.

The current planning process is hopeful in that it reminds us just how much people care about Jackson Hole. Yes there's some NIMBYism going on. But rather than self-interest, I think the primary cause of the planning-process cum-trench-warfare is residents' passion for their community. And that's a wonderful thing.

But as last week's Massachusetts Senate race showed, passion – especially passion complemented by bountiful resources – tends to crush logic. And since good long-range planning is grounded in logic, it's hard to see how the current comp plan revision process is going to result in the kind of focused, prescriptive regulations originally hoped for by all those currently hunkered down their respective planning trenches. I hope I'm wrong. However, to complete the World War 1 metaphor, four years of trench warfare is not the outcome leaders of that era wanted either.