CITY PLANNING—WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

April 1953
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Lincoln seems destined to grow. Shall the development be like that of "Topsy," who wasn’t raised but "just grew"? Can the interests of private persons, with their multitude of ideas and aims, be trusted to build a great city?

All of the cities of our Nation larger than Lincoln, and 90% of those in Lincoln’s class, are not leaving their development to chance and private interest, but are taking intelligent thought through planning for their future.

Our serious, sustained efforts have been confined mostly to the last few years, and, judged by the procedure followed in other communities, we are making some progress.

Past "Mistakes" of Lincoln

As in the case of individuals, municipalities can often look backwards and see errors in their course which were not so evident to those in authority when the error was made.

Present day critics, with the great advantage of "hindsight," can point to such "errors" of the pioneers as starting a city at the lowest portion of a great flood basin; the laying of the Rock Island tracks in the early 1890's where they now bisect our city; and, more recently, the retention of the University Campus downtown where it undeniably adds to our traffic problems.

If some or all of these are "errors," they are perhaps errors of judgment and positive action due to the human inability to look so far into the future.

Mistakes of Drifting and Inaction

It seems that most of our municipal mistakes of the last quarter of a century (which we are just now in the process of correcting) are mistakes of a negative character, a "laissez faire" policy of letting matters take their natural course, for example:

1. The "Disease of Decentralization."

This is the continued spreading out in circumference of cities while more and more vacant or run-down properties nearer the center of business are passed over.

No doubt, our "disease of decentralization" has been caused mainly by the coming of the private automobile. People leave the older parts of the city to have the advantage of the more open country. The process has been aided by private enterprise in developing unsettled areas.

Some of the unfavorable results are the intensified problem of traffic and transportation; the difficulty and financial loss falling to the city to provide paving, water, and sewer services; and the creation of blighted areas in the original city when obsolescence of structures and other unpleasant conditions have driven former occupants to the suburbs.

There is great pressure to create local business centers in residence districts, thus seriously weakening the tax structure of the city by drawing away the lifeblood from its center.

One of the remedies for this disease, as undertaken in many cities, is "urban re-development," in which the city acquires run-down property and resells it for new commercial uses, or the creation of rental dwellings. A little noticed portion of the U. S. Housing Act of 1949 offers aid to cities for this purpose.

An ordinance fixing minimum standards for rental properties in the City would not only remove slums but increase the supply of decent housing.

A new subdivision ordinance passed by the Council July 21, 1952, will, if adhered to by the Council, have the effect of checking further scattering of Lincoln and cause occupancy of vacant lands nearer the
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Perhaps this has been due partly to rapidly changing conditions in Lincoln, but probably mostly due to the lack of regard by the Council and others for such a hodgepodge creation as the "zoning ordinance" has become. Under such conditions a councilman has little backing to resist the requests of friends or pressure groups for "spot zoning" and further mutilation of the ordinance.

There is, for example, continuous pressure to place local business in outlying residence districts. Many sessions of the Council are nearly taken up with pleas for special zoning on one hand, and opposition from residential property owners in the neighborhood on the other hand, both sides frequently represented by legal counsel.

Too often the results turn not on the question of what is best for the long range interest of the whole city, but upon the easiest way out of a present difficulty.

When a zoning status is given to property, and action is taken upon the status by the property owner, it becomes a vested property right and can be changed by the city, if at all, only by costly condemnation proceedings.

This outcome was deplored by the Lincoln Realtors in 1943 when they were disturbed over the matter of Capitol environs.

The greatest need of the immediate future is a new zoning ordinance which the Council and all others can respect and stand upon, and rescue the city from present anarchy in zoning.

2. Anarchy in Zoning.

Zoning is the division of a city into districts or zones regulating the use of land and the use, height, and area of buildings, to protect the health, safety, and general welfare of the people. It is the long range view of all the citizens, the desires and present interests of individuals.

A zoning ordinance should be enacted by a city council only after a thorough-going survey of a city's economic possibilities, the trend of its population, the amount of land needed for retail business, industry, residential and recreational purposes, etc.

Lincoln's so-called zoning ordinance, written in 1926 and many times amended, was not, and is not, based on such a plan. It was merely an adaptation in 1926 by the City Engineering and Legal Departments of a more elaborate zoning plan considered impractical for Lincoln.

Since 1926 it has been amended by the City Council, several hundred times--120 times in approximately the last 5 years.

center of the city.

It requires submission to, and approval by, the Planning Commission of the proposed new development and requires of the subdivider guarantees for the installation of public improvements such as utilities.

Such requirements would have saved the City of Lincoln several hundred thousand dollars loss in the past through over-development, the taxpayers footing the bill for improvements such as paving, water and sewer mains, sidewalks, etc.

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Since 1926 it has been amended by the City Council, several hundred times--120 times in approximately the last 5 years!
in a year,—say, half a dozen in a city of Lincoln’s size.

The records seem to show that in the past ten years the Board of Appeals has been called upon to consider nearly 1,000 actions, or an average of 8 each month, an activity sixteen times that of desirable standards.

This is no criticism on the fine group of public spirited citizens who, from time to time, have served on the Zoning Board. Their decisions have, upon the whole, been in accord with the facts of each case and the existing ordinances. The fault lies with the chaotic state of the zoning ordinances which encourages property owners to appeal from the decisions of the Building Inspector with the hope that his decision will be modified or reversed finally by the City Council.

The decision of the Council often takes the form of “permits” for some irregular property use for a limited time.

The Comprehensive City Plan, recently published, criticizes the excessive granting of permits—363 in the last 10 years—within the city and just outside. “Such a procedure,” says the report, “is neither fair nor equitable, since no one can tell what the action of the Board of Appeals and the City Council may be in the future…”

4. Tardy Creation of Planning Machinery.

The Legislature of 1937 passed an enabling Act so that municipalities could set up machinery for city planning. (C. S. 1943, Article 13.)

After eleven years we took action and April 19, 1948, is likely to be a landmark in Lincoln’s history. On that date the City Council passed an ordinance creating a City Planning Commission. Later a group of 9 outstanding public spirited citizens was appointed.*

Not only were we slow about creating any well defined planning agencies, but there is still a general lack of understanding of the functions and value of a “City Planning Commission,” a “Comprehensive City Plan,” the services of consultants, and a “Citizens’ Advisory Committee.”

A permanent Planning Commission is the key to the whole planning effort. It is a specialized group of citizens in a watch tower looking out for a whole city’s physical development. It puts elasticity into city plans while following a general pattern.

While its recommendations and findings are not binding on the City Council, they are entitled to great respect because of their long range, impartial point of view based on gathered facts.

The Comprehensive or Master Plan is the guide to the Planning Commission, made for them by those accustomed to taking an inventory of a community’s present conditions, possibilities, and aspirations.

It is not a hard and fast plan of streets, parks, etc. It is only the elements of a community plan, to be changed as occasion demands.

It is a “cyclopedia” of information about a city’s economic resources and possibilities; its population trends and distribution; its present and future land needs for industry, business, homes, public buildings and recreation; its problems of traffic and transportation; its regulation of new subdivisions calling for the extension of municipal services; its supply of safe and sanitary housing.

It is such a “cyclopedia” or comprehensive survey good for, say, 25 or more years to come.

Such a Comprehensive Survey of 286 pages bearing evidence of thorough, painstaking work with respect to Lincoln has recently been completed and adopted by the City Planning Commission.

The services of Expert Consultants are indispensable.

The development of modern cities has become so complicated that the old-time city authorities and agencies are not able to handle long range planning. They are occupied with the daily immediate needs of the city. They do not have the time and the training to make comprehensive plans that look forward a quarter or half century. Such work has become a profession requiring long experience and skill in such matters.

* The original members were: Walter Wilson, Kenneth P. Lewis, Joseph Ginsburg, C. Petrus Peterson, Cecil Donley, Mrs. Fred Putney, Emil Bohmer, E. J. Faulkner, and Wadner Scott. D. B. Marti is now serving in place of Emil Bohmer, deceased. The Mayor and City Engineer are ex officio members,
The costs of planning in Lincoln to date are as follows:

From 1950 to the present time there has been paid to the planning engineers, Bartholomew and Associates, the sum of $58,680.

Supplies, etc., have cost $3,820, making a total of $62,500.

But the Federal Government has contributed $14,000 for engineering services, and the Cooper Foundation has made substantial gifts, making the net cost to Lincoln less than $48,500, or a per capita expenditure of about 12c per year since 1948.

Keeping an eye on the process of planning after the survey has been made demands the work of, at least, one Staff Engineer to serve the Planning Commission and the City Council. This staff service is attached to the City Engineer’s office and is at present rendered by Paul Watt who did much research work on the Master Plan.

5. Lincoln has never given much connected thought as to the type of city it shall be.

Probably the ideal most commonly held is that it is destined to be the center of education and culture of the State, the location not only of State but also Federal offices and personnel, a city in which men and women like to spend their retirement. The measure of progress seems to be reckoned in a steady growth in population.

However, farsighted observers are beginning to sense a danger in merely such a development. They are beginning to ask, not how much population increase, but what kind? Is it a consuming population only or partly a wealth-producing population, a population that will also contribute through the production of wealth to the upkeep of the physical community?

This suggests that while various state and local agencies spend much effort to bring new industries to Nebraska and Lincoln, we may not have been too kind to afford them suitable locations.

Lincoln has not been particularly friendly to large sites for industry. When land used by the railroads, and lands subject to floods are eliminated, very few large industrial sites are available.

The new proposals of the Planning Commission will almost double the available land for industrial purposes, outside the amount for railroads and land subject to occasional flooding.


Unless public sentiment is behind planning and zoning laws, the effort will not get very far. The City will continue to be the victim of first one pressure group then another.

Decisions will continue to be made, not on the grounds of what is best for the City as a whole, but on the grounds that a little concession here and there “will not hurt anything.”

The Citizens’ Planning Committee of some 160 men and women from all parts of the City, and of varied interests have a primary responsibility, must arouse and keep alive citizen interest in planning.

The firm making the survey and Comprehensive Plan in Lincoln, Bartholomew and Associates of St. Louis, has made between 80 and 100 such plans for cities of the United States, at least 21 in cities of Lincoln’s class, 23 in cities of more than 100,000.

Apparently the hiring of such consultants is the only way a city can get the benefits of wide experience with a minimum of errors and costs.

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**Revenue Bonds For City Water**

("Revenue bonds" are bonds not paid by taxation but are paid out of earnings of an enterprise usually more or less of a business character.)

A little more than twenty years ago Lincoln was having a lively discussion as to where to go for water. Local wells were becoming inadequate and threaten-
water but grossly inadequate.

An engineering firm, Burns and McDonnell of Kansas City, was called in for advice. This firm turned thumbs down on all but the Platte River site near Ashland.

It is the general opinion that this decision was one of the most fortunate in the history of the city.

In 1931 the voters authorized the issuing of $2,300,000 of general obligation bonds to provide a 36-inch water main from Ashland with pumping station, storage facilities, and other equipment.

Only $1,915,000 of these general obligation bonds (against the credit of the city as a whole) were issued.

These bonds have been paid off entirely out of earnings of the Water Department, except $15,000, the owners of which cannot be located.

There is a cash balance of $311,173.51 in Water Department funds, as of February 28, 1953, and investments exist in the amount of $242,008.98.

Meanwhile, our water rates have been distinctly low in comparison with those in other cities of our size. For example:

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What Has Happened to Lincoln in 20 Years?

1. The city has grown from 76,000 people to over 100,000, not including possible increase at the air base.

2. Water consumption has greatly increased, principally due to several factors:
   a. Population increase and new homes.
   b. The growth of air conditioning.
   c. The expansion of industry.
   d. Increased need of fire protection.

3. We have had a cycle of relatively wet years. Even so, there have been a few occasions when it was necessary to draw heavily on reserves and curtail use of water temporarily. Old observers of Nebraska weather are pretty sure we will run into corresponding cycles of dry years.

What Is Being Done to Provide Adequate Water?

1. A committee of outstanding citizens was appointed by the Mayor and Council to make recommendations. They were:
   Byron Dunn (National Bank of Commerce), Chairman;
   O. J. Ferguson (Former Dean of the College of Engineering);
   Ted Sick (President of Security Mutual Life Ins. Co.);
   Ernest L. Smith (of Magee's and former City Councilman);
   William I. Aitken (Lawyer).

2. Black and Veatch, Kansas City, engineers, specialists several times employed in this vicinity, recommended an additional 48-inch water main Ashland to Lincoln, paralleling the 36-inch main now existing, also plant enlargement, additional wells at Ashland, and more standby wells and equipment at Lincoln.

3. The Citizens' Committee, above mentioned, recommended that the City Charter be amended to permit the issuing of $8 1/2 million revenue bonds for the purpose of bringing our water supply up to probable needs to 1987 as far as the Ashland to Lincoln pipe line is concerned.

Revenue Bonds and Charter Amendment

The question of increasing our water supply will be voted upon May 5, as a charter amendment.

The Charter at present does not provide for issuing revenue bonds (bonds paid without taxation), to expand our water system.

All other cities in Nebraska, except Lincoln, can issue revenue bonds to build or enlarge water plants. The trend is in this direction all over the Nation.

The main reason for such a trend is to keep the "proprietary functions" of a city, functions that are of a business character, from being subsized out of tax money. The theory is that any business run by a city should stand on its own feet and be held to the necessary efficiency to make it a going concern.
Also if general obligation bonds as large as required for the water needs were floated, in addition to bonds now outstanding, they might lower the city’s excellent rating in the bond market and call for a higher rate of interest.

Will water rates go up if the revenue bonds are issued? Perhaps a small increase may be necessary. That cannot be told definitely before knowing the interest rate that can be obtained.

As shown elsewhere, the city has a good record for holding down water rates and lowering them whenever possible.

Could the holders of revenue bonds foreclose and take over the Water Works System?

Yes, in case of gross mismanagement that would not provide for payment of the bonds and interest. Bond holders want interest payments and principal, not municipal water plants. There would seem to be not as much danger of a city’s losing its water plant through revenue bonds as there would be of home owners’ losing their homes through other types of bonds.

Plenty of good water is an absolute essential and the past record of economical management of our Water Department gives us confidence to vote for the bonds.

We are in need of more contributions for the support of our organization.

Why not send us a check now?