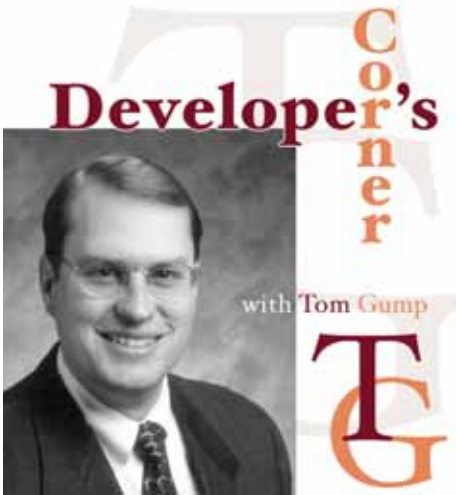




Keep regional comprehensive planning goals in mind

Understanding of dynamics is key for developers



Comprehensive planning in the metropolitan area plays an important role affecting developers and municipalities alike. Under State law, the Metropolitan Council (Met Council) and the individual metropolitan cities must work together to adequately plan future growth within the seven county area.

For its part, the Met Council is mandated to examine the projected growth within the metropolitan area and determine how the essential systems of transportation, aviation, water resources (including waste water collection and treatment) and regional parks/open space can work in concert from community to community.

An overall system plan for regional growth over the next 30 years is essentially broken down into “system statements” that are distributed to the individual communities. Each system state-

ment outlines the minimum standards a community must adopt in its comprehensive plan to ensure compliance with the overall regional plan.

Some cities embrace the opportunities presented by planned growth in these system statements, while others view these mandates as an infringement on local authority. Similarly, some cities may seek greater opportunities to expand anticipated development, while others will fight to avoid meeting even the minimum levels outlined by the regional plan. Developers must understand all of these dynamics when examining possible projects to adequately assess the risks that may arise if a comprehensive plan amendment is needed.

Comprehensive plans

Each community in the metropolitan area is required to update its comprehensive plan every 10 years and within three years of receiving a revised system statement from the Met Council. The most recent system statements were sent to cities in 2005, which requires all updates be completed by the end of 2008.

In addition to meeting the minimum standards for growth outlined by a system statement, state law requires local comprehensive plans to include a land use component containing objectives, policies and programs to guide local land use. The land use plan not only identifies areas of existing development, but also guides areas for new development (or redevelopment) into various uses of different intensity and extent.

A housing element within the plan ensures the community meets both local and regional needs while protecting his-

torical sites and natural resources. As a whole, the final document is intended to express the vision for community growth over the next 30 years. Keep in mind that development of these plans can often be controversial and that preparing the plans is a costly and time-consuming endeavor. For these reasons, communities are wary of approving changes once the plan has been approved.

Plan amendments for development

While comprehensive plans provide a necessary guide for cities and the region, it is inevitable that market conditions and other factors will present development opportunities that do not correspond to an approved comprehensive plan. When such opportunities arise, developers must convince both the municipality and the Met Council that the desired development option is best for all parties.

With regards to a municipality, a developer must be able to articulate how the proposed project is analogous to the planned land use or how the proposal will be better than the planned vision. It is important to link aspects of the proposal to the broad goals and visions outlined in the comprehensive plan to illustrate why the project is a natural fit for the community. Public support from nearby landowners can many times be a catalyst for success.

With the Met Council, a developer must demonstrate that the project is compatible with regional system statements. Keep in mind that there is only so much sewer capacity available in the regional system, so the Met Council will work on behalf of multiple communities

to ensure projects will not use too much or too little of the capacity in the regional sewer system.

In addition to sewer capacity, the Met Council will also examine each project's impact on housing and transportation needs. Will the project create unanticipated traffic impacts to the planned roadway system? Will the project accommodate enough housing to keep the municipality on track with meeting its regional housing obligations? Knowing the answers to questions like these will assist developers in navigating the comprehensive plan amendment process.

Stone's Throw: a real life example

When visualizing the Stone's Throw development in Hassan Township, the developer saw a project that would greatly benefit both the community and the region. Unfortunately, the vision for the property was not directly consistent with the comprehensive plan guidance over the entire 634 acres that make up Stone's Throw. In fact, the proposed development area was originally guided for 50 percent commercial/industrial uses and 50 percent urban single-family development at zero to three units per acre.

As originally planned, this breakdown

would have accommodated approximately 573 single-family homes and 5.5 million square feet of commercial/industrial buildings, which is in stark contrast to the proposed 1,441 housing units and 4.4 million square feet of commercial-only space (no industrial) proposed for Stone's Throw.

Furthermore, a significant number of the home sites in Stone's Throw are proposed to be multi-family (a designation that was not even permitted under the town's comprehensive plan when the project started).

To make such changes, the developer worked closely with town officials, staff, neighboring communities and many other regulatory agencies to express the collective vision for the site and the benefits it would bring to the community and region. Meetings and community outreach were used to share this vision with the town citizens to ensure they understood the proposal and what it could mean for the town. Support garnered through these efforts eventually lead to the undertaking of an Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) to study the potential environmental impacts of the development and the incorporation of the necessary land use guidance for the project into the town's updated 2008 comprehensive plan.

In the interim, the town took action to jump-start the project by approving a comprehensive plan amendment for Phase One of the development. The Met Council's Community Development Committee recommended the approval of this amendment, as it was determined to be in compliance with the regional system plans and the planning of surrounding communities.

In December, the full Met Council approved the comprehensive plan amendment for Phase One of the Stone's Throw project. Sixty-three acres of land are now guided for urban mid-density residential (three to seven units per acre) allowing for up to 440 new housing units.

Soon the first phase of Stone's Throw will be under way and the efforts of many parties will be realized.

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Tom Gump is a development principal with The Beard Group Inc.