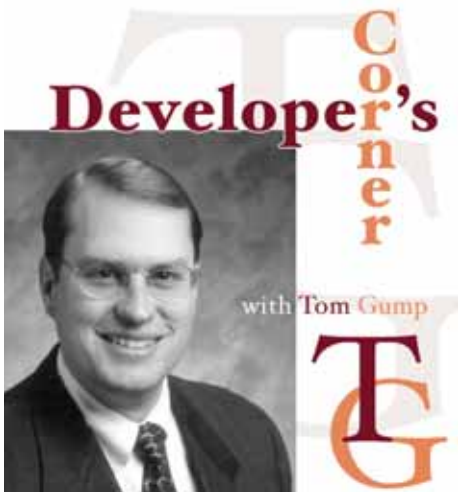




Working with Met Council goals is a balancing act

But regional priorities can yield big benefits



The good news is our Twin Cities metropolitan community is growing, and based on trends we're seeing, it will continue to grow well into the future. In fact, the Metropolitan Council (Met Council) estimates — even with the slowdown in the housing market — that the seven-county area will add approximately 1 million additional residents by 2030.

This is good news because these additional residents represent the growing workforce that will be needed to staff an expanding economy. They will help to keep our retail and housing markets strong, and they will provide our communities new energies and talents that will help sustain their vitality and prosperity.

Not every metropolitan area is blessed with this kind of energizing growth. Many regions around the country are losing population and have to

deal with the challenges of neighborhood deterioration and urban decay from the position of a declining workforce and eroding tax base.

The projected growth is good news. However, the challenge will be to manage this growth in such a way that benefits are maximized and costs are minimized. Poorly planned and ill-managed growth is expensive and unsuitable.

The Met Council's policies

From the beginning, the charge of the Met Council has been to guide the "orderly and economic" growth of the region. To that end, it has developed a set of policies that it expects every community in the metropolitan area to incorporate into its comprehensive plans. These policies are also reinforced through a variety of infrastructure investment strategies and grant and assistance programs designed to help support their implementation.

The four policies are:

- * Accommodating growth in a flexible, connected and efficient manner;
- * Slowing the growth in traffic congestion and improving mobility;
- * Encouraging expanded choices in housing locations and types; and
- * Conserving, protecting and enhancing the region's vital natural resources.

The Met Council recognizes that, in the application of these policies, one size does not fit all — that different communities have different opportunities, needs and aspirations. Therefore it has included with the policies different strategies that are tailored for fully developed communities, communities

that are still developing and different types of rural areas. The Council's regional plans also reflect the belief that all communities have a shared responsibility to help accommodate the region's growth in a sensible, cost-effective manner.

In order for the Council's growth policies to have real influence, they must be incorporated into actual development or redevelopment projects. The true and lasting measure of the effectiveness of these policies will not be in how good they sound, but in how well they work; how well they translate into construction; and how consistent they are with the policies of the local communities and other regulatory bodies that are reviewing and permitting the construction.

It's a difficult balancing act, especially given that every project involves a unique set of needs, opportunities and challenges.

Stone's Throw example

The Beard Group, through its experience in redevelopment projects, has gained an appreciation of both the practical and policy implications of designing projects that integrate efficiently, yet creatively, with existing land use patterns. We have attempted to bring that same experience to the design of our Stone's Throw project in Hassan Township in northwestern Hennepin County.

As a 643-acre green site development in the only remaining township in Hennepin County, the design challenge was not so much the need to integrate with what was already there, as it was to anticipate and model a sustainable

pattern for the future. In doing so, we believe we have succeeded in not only creating an economically viable project, but also one that puts into practice the goals of the Met Council's development guidelines.

The plan for Stone's Throw is based on creating a variety of neighborhoods connected internally to parks and shops and services designed to serve the neighborhood and externally to regional amenities through an expansive system of trains, bikeways, and streets. These connections serve both extensive recreational and employment opportunities within the larger development and link the different neighborhoods to each other.

The Beard Group has spent nearly two years working with the communities of Hassan Township, Rogers and Dayton, as well as with surrounding property owners, developing plans for the efficient and phased improvement of sub-regional systems that serve the site. These have included not only connections to regional infrastructure but also to services such as fire and police protection.

Slowing the growth in traffic congestion. It is obvious that the density requirements implicit in the development policies that the Met Council uses can't be achieved without adequate regional wastewater treatment capacity. It is equally obvious that they cannot be achieved without adequate regional transportation capacity. The full potential of Stone's Throw to exemplify the application of the Met Council's development policies on a significant scale is threatened by an adjacent transportation system that is not adequate to handle projected traffic levels even if no additional development occurred.

To address this issue the Beard Group has partnered with the affected communities, Hennepin County and

MnDOT to study options for improving transportation capacity in and around Stone's Throw, including the need for a new interchange on Interstate 94 at Brockton Lane. The Beard Group has also been assessing ways in which the higher housing densities on the north end of the project can help support transit options along either the County Road 81 or the I-94 corridor. This assessment is being done in parallel with the city of Dayton's consideration of transit oriented design opportunities in the same area.

Together these initiatives can be instrumental in achieving both the goals of accommodating growth and improving mobility through cooperative planning, efficient design and increased travel alternatives.

Encouraging expanded choices in housing types. The Stone's Throw project has also been designed to accommodate a broad range of housing options. Its 1,300 anticipated total housing units will provide for a variety of lifestyle choices and options from starter homes and townhomes to higher value single-family residences and active senior neighborhoods.

The various housing styles planned for the community will also be reflected in the diversity of services and employment opportunities anticipated to be available in the large commercial area of the development enhancing the connections between residents, amenities, services and jobs all within the Stone's Throw boundaries.

Conserving natural resources. Finally, protecting this area's natural and ecological resources was extremely important to the project partners. Wanting to ensure that natural resources are protected and enhanced, Stone's Throw has incorporated more than 200 acres of green and open space — nearly one-third of the land included in the development.

Stieg Woods, a wooded area that has stood on the property for at least 130 years, is being largely preserved. Additionally, Stone's Throw's design includes over fourteen miles of bike and walking paths.

Conclusion

Communities throughout the region are testing new ideas for developing town centers, encouraging mixed-use development that can support transit, reclaiming polluted lands, revitalizing aging strip malls, expanding housing choices and integrating natural-resource protection into their land-use planning decisions. Perhaps most importantly, any successful comprehensive planning process requires communities to talk, and sometimes partner, with their neighbors.

Together the Beard Group and the adjacent communities have worked to plan and implement a major new development that expresses the goals of the communities' comprehensive plans and the Met Council's development guidelines. The result can be a community that accommodates growth, improves mobility, expands housing options and preserves natural resources.

But making this kind of development work takes a great deal of cooperative effort. It's not something a developer, a city or the Met Council can do on its own. It requires that everyone be at the table exploring solutions and finding ways to ensure that, in the end, local and private sector interests come together to create a viable and sustainable future for the region.

Tom Gump, development principal with the Beard Group Inc., invites comments and questions about this column. He can be reached at 952-930-0630 or via email at tomg@beardgroupinc.com.