

Courthouse Debacle's Lesson

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Two and a half years ago, at the end of an unprecedented building boom, Michael Nutter was elected mayor pledging to change the way we plan and build our city.

His zoning and planning reform proposal noted that continuing to allow the city to grow haphazardly could "create excessive density, foreclose opportunities for public amenities, increase automobile dependency, neglect opportunities to direct development activity ... and diminish the pedestrian-scaled character that makes Philadelphia neighborhoods so desirable."

Today, in the wake of a real estate and credit collapse, the city is not facing the same development pressures. So can we still afford to plan, or should we simply accept whatever development proposals happen to come about?

The truth is that it's even more important to plan carefully during a slow economy. Unfortunately, though, despite Mayor Nutter's efforts to reform the city's planning processes, the bizarre deal-making that accompanied the site selection for the new Family Court building - in which the same lawyer seems to have worked for parties on both sides of the project - shows that the old ways of doing business in Philadelphia have not been put to rest. Apparently, there's still a need to emphasize that the Planning Commission is the place to plan the location of major civic structures.

The Design Advocacy Group has long argued for reform of the city's approach to planning and development. Our 2006 reform agenda brought attention to these issues at the outset of the last mayoral campaign, and we recently surveyed our members about the progress of reform and the mayor's handling of urban design issues.

The administration scored well on some important issues. Most respondents recognized improvements to the zoning and permitting processes. The establishment of the Mayor's Office of Transportation is considered an important step

toward coordinating the city's transportation decisions. The mayor also received credit for supporting efforts to rewrite the zoning code, and especially for highlighting sustainability issues.

Given all that, it's surprising that 72 percent of respondents feel the mayor has not come up with "transformative ideas" to improve the quality of the city's design, and 75 percent believe the administration has not sufficiently considered urban design in its decisions. Even given Nutter's capable handling of planning policies, it seems he has not managed to convey a commitment to good urban design or to present a compelling vision of the city.

Casinos and the Family Court project were the disappointments most frequently cited by survey respondents. Of course, since these projects were largely outside the administration's control, they cannot be blamed on the mayor. But that underscores a major problem: If the administration does not persistently define the direction of the city's growth, other forces will.

True, the mayor has begun the process of creating the city's first comprehensive plan in nearly 50 years - a very important effort that, with enough political support, can guide the city's growth well into the future.

But what about the city's growth over the next six years? If the mayor expects to positively influence the city's development during his likely term of office, he will have to focus his leadership abilities on current as well as future development.

Decisions are being made now that will shape projects such as the new and old Family Court buildings, the proposed sports and entertainment district, the development of the Delaware River waterfront, and improvements to East Market Street, as well as the many Redevelopment Authority projects around the city. To maximize the benefits to neighborhoods and the city as a whole, the future of all of these projects needs to be carefully planned, with serious attention to factors that impact the urban environment.

As the Family Court story illustrates so dramatically, every development project is subject to influences that are not always in the city's best interests. To counter these influences, a commitment to high-quality city planning must be reinforced at every level of government, and this commitment must be bolstered by a well-articulated vision of Philadelphia's future. In the face of our current economic difficulties, we can afford no less.



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