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A COMPREHENSIVE CITY PLANNING PROGRAM

for

FORT MYERS, FLORIDA

October, 1966

ADLEY ASSOCIATES, INC.

Tampa

Atlanta

Jacksonville

BACKGROUND OF THIS REPORT

The intent of this report is to review and evaluate the accomplishments to date of the City's planning program, to examine the present and future problems of the community with which planning must be concerned; and, based on these two initial steps, to recommend a program of city planning activity to extend over the next several years.

This report necessarily must deal only with those public activities coming under the banner of city planning, although it is fully recognized that, as in any community, there are private firms and institutions developing plans for the future which must also be considered a part of the overall process of city building.

Some of this planning activity of the private sector was revealed in the series of leadership interviews conducted to determine both the current and the prospective planning problems of the area.

In summary form, the findings of this reconnaissance-type study are as follows:

1. Most of the technical components of a comprehensive city plan already exist, although now somewhat outdated, having been prepared in 1960. Several special studies remain to be done in order to have a complete comprehensive plan.

2. The plan elements previously prepared appear to be technically sound. What is lacking is understanding of their recommendations by the citizen leadership and implementation of their findings through a continuing planning effort.
3. There is considerable interest among the citizen leaders of the community in the planning program and an expressed intent to "get some planning done" and "to keep the community moving".
4. Throughout a series of interviews held with citizen leaders, one issue dominated every conversation - the plight of the city's central business district (CBD) in terms of structural obsolescence, poor traffic circulation, lack of retailing aggressiveness, unattractive storefronts, and a general decline in the level of activity in the face of competition from the outlying shopping centers. No other issue received a fraction of the emphasis placed on the plight of the CBD.
5. Following the priority given to the CBD issue came statements focusing on: the need to seek light industrial development, to enhance the natural appeal of the area for tourism, an erratic zoning pattern, urban sprawl into the unincorporated fringe areas, and the need to agree on the future image of the community.
6. New development in the City is going on at a uniformly high level due to enforcement of sound codes; however, several large pockets of poor and dilapidated housing do exist in the city and require drastic remedial treatment.

7. Any planning for the future must involve tight coordination of the City's planning effort with that of the County's since the majority of new problems are occurring in the fringe area beyond the city limits.

8. The immediate major effort of the City's planning program must be to develop the several additional technical studies needed to fill out the comprehensive plan and even more important, to present the findings of the previous plan to the citizen leadership in such a way as to generate discussion and understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF PLANNING

In 1959, the City officials of Fort Myers contracted with the Florida Development Commission to prepare certain major elements or parts of a Comprehensive Plan by utilizing a funding program, known as "701" Local Planning Assistance, two-thirds of the cost of these technical studies was borne by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The planning elements completed under this program were:

1. A survey of existing land use which shows on a large-scale map, by color symbol, the use to which all land both within the City and in its immediate environs is put; e.g., single-family, two-family or multi-family residential, commercial, industrial, etc.
2. A preliminary analysis of population and economic growth trends which provides a broad guideline as to the number and type of population for which community facilities must be provided.
3. A base map of the city and its immediate environs upon which to place all planning data and recommendations.
4. A Major Thoroughfare Plan showing a recommended system of major and minor traffic routes to handle both present and anticipated traffic in the urban area.

5. A Future Land Use Plan indicating the most effective and desirable future use of land within the urban area.
6. A Community Facilities Plan showing the facilities necessary to serve the population, now and in the future, indicating the approximate location of schools, parks, recreation areas, fire stations and other governmental buildings and areas.
7. A Plan for Redevelopment of the Central Business District which dealt in broad terms with the traffic circulation and land use needs of downtown and recommended overall measures for improvement.
8. A Subdivision Regulation setting forth the technical and administrative standards and procedures to be followed in processing an application to subdivide land within the City.
9. A draft of a Zoning Regulation for the City intended to replace the City's then-existing ordinance.

A review of these printed studies indicates that they appeared to be technically competent and reasonably inclusive when originally conducted. However, these studies conducted in 1959 and 1960 were not received by the City in report form until 1965. This considerable time lapse, of course, makes the reports less relevant, since they contain outmoded data and facts.

It is not within the purview of this reconnaissance report to decide whether the recommendations of the 1959 plan are still valid. Obviously, such a conclusion can be reached only by re-examining the facts on which the conclusions were based.

The basic question raised by this study is whether the reports and technical plans prepared back in 1959 and 1960 have been effective in their purpose. Unfortunately, the answer must be negative. This is not due to any inherent fault in the plans themselves but rather to their lack of implementation which is a function of the time lag in delivery of the reports.

These planning reports of the City - while apparently technically sound and comprehensive in their approach - have not served their purpose, which was to guide urban growth and influence decision making. The fault lies, as noted, in the time lapse between plan preparation and presentation and, more particularly, in the resultant failure to develop an informed citizenry at the time the plans were being developed and to give the citizen leaders a sense of participating fully in the planning.

The planning program recommended in this report is designed to build upon the factual material of these previous technical planning studies and to use them as the basis for gaining full understanding of their proposals.

Specific Results of the 1959 Plan

In certain specific areas, the recommendations of the plan have been heeded,

and, where this has occurred, tangible results have been accomplished.

The present downtown parking program now being placed on the ground follows generally recommendations of the downtown plan. Decisions regarding the improvement of several traffic routes have also adhered to the findings of the plan. So, in these specific respects, where full knowledge of the plan existed on the part of key City officials, positive results have occurred.

The zoning ordinance, prepared by this 1959 planning effort, has not been adopted - and, is considered to be inappropriate to the City's needs. Instead, a preliminary working draft of a new zoning ordinance, tailored to the City's needs and wishes, is now under way by the Department of Building, Zoning and Planning and should be available for public discussion in 1967. As each section of this Ordinance is developed in draft form, it is reviewed closely with key people in the development field so that the total Ordinance, when finally developed, will reflect their thinking. Fortunately, interest in a planning program spurred the City to secure a Chief Building Official, who had experience with a comprehensive planning program and who was concerned with citizen education both in planning and code enforcement.

This department has, with its limited available staff time, managed to maintain the map of existing land use in a current condition and this provides the planning program with a sound and factual base.

In the next chapter, the responses of key leadership persons of the City to a series of questions regarding the immediate and long-range needs of the City are discussed. Almost all of these leadership individuals knew that a plan had been prepared but were generally not aware of its findings. Repeatedly, however, the responses of these leaders indicated that they did want a strong planning program and would involve themselves in one if the opportunity were offered.

CHAPTER II

ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS ON DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

This chapter presents an evaluation and commentary on the community's planning needs by a number of its leading citizens. These responses to a series of questions were made within the context of certain basic economic and development trends now under way in the city and urban area. These trends provide a backdrop against which the comments made can best be viewed. A summary of these trends is as follows:

Fort Myers is centrally located in an area undergoing abrupt and extensive change. This change can be quantified by:

- ... a population which has increased two and a half times during the past fifteen years within the City alone;
- ... a prosperous agriculture, rapidly diversifying, that last year pumped \$25,000,000 into local economy.
- ... "buying income-per family", which has increased by 28 per cent in the last six years,
- ... and, in a building boom which, in a fifteen-year period, raised the assessed valuation of Lee County from a little over \$32,000,000 to more than \$293,600,000 - a nine-fold gain.

But, based on the interviews and on a review of economic data, there appear to be several soft spots in this record of economic progress and rising income levels:

- ... One soft spot is the rapid shift of a major portion of the retail core from the central business district to shopping centers located in fringe areas.

- ... A second is a street pattern not yet fully linked together, that funnels tourists through downtown thoroughfares, and that during "the season" becomes quite incapable of bearing traffic to and from beach communities.

- ... A third is the number of sub-standard houses, clustered in areas like "The Hill" - costly to the taxpayer, a threat to community health and acting as a barrier to the development of potentially-valuable and useful properties.

- ... A fourth soft spot is a product of the first three - a growing disparity, evidenced in appearance, energy and outlook between Fort Myers and the major new communities which have been created to the north, the east and the south.

These negative factors contrast sharply with the bright future that the factual economic indicators portend for this era. Some comments by the persons interviewed highlight this paradox:

. "We're a stagnant city in the middle of a growth area . . ."

- . Fort Myers has just lain here for twenty years and hasn't moved a tap . ."
- . "Industry for Fort Myers? I take a dim view! Too much time and money has been spent promoting it when this money could have been spent building the town."
- . "Community services are a serious problem. The City has no plan. Surface flooding is a serious problem - nothing seems to be done about it . . ."
- . "Sewer and water line extension is a major need - access streets are too."
- . "Zoning mucks up every main road we have with uneconomic junk."
- . "Our central business district is trying to get over the shock of losing two big stores to the shopping centers and of Belk's going out of business."
- . "Part of the problem is lack of foresight on the part of the store-owners . . . many leaseholders have percentage leases . . so they should want to make improvements . . ."
- . "One problem is people who bought land entirely too high . . they're waiting now for a price they'll never get . . . downtown is going to get worse before it gets better . . ."

These criticisms were offered constructively by leadership people with a high stake in the community who are expressing impatience, but offsetting this expressed self-criticism was a parallel confidence in the future of their town.

This confidence is based on some solid facts, cited by those interviewed:

- . "A Presbyterian Retirement Center is proposed for the area, and one proposed right here in the City . . . another non-profit organization is inquiring about possibilities, too."
- . "A private group is investigating the feasibility of establishing a major hotel in the downtown area where two other chains have established outstandingly successful motels."
- . "The two banks that formerly served the area have been supplemented by seven additional banks - they've all done very well . . capitalization has about doubled."

- "Our growth is solid, with many new, young residents. You can see this reflected in the schools. Six years ago there was one high school and now there are several. One school in North Fort Myers has increased its teaching staff from 20 to 60 during the past few years."
- "There is a plan under study now that would put a new high-rise apartment building on the Collier Property where the old bus station used to be . . . that would give downtown a real shot in the arm."
- "Our location on the river is a great asset - tourists are impressed with our palms and the peaceful atmosphere . . . those palms still give me a "lift" every night when I drive home."
- "Our community services are at a high level - for our size town, we have services second to none . . . the Mayor has done a great job with downtown parking and with hard-topping roads."
- "Mayor Simpson started a water and sewer program and Mayor Myers is expanding it - it's difficult though when you're working on flat land . . . there's no place for surface water to drain to."
- "Yesterday I took a prospect from Atlanta to look at a downtown property. They wanted 800 square feet - but ended up taking a thousand! They'll employ twelve women and two or three men."
- "There is good cooperation among downtown merchants. I'm optimistic."

Comparing the comments received in this series of interviews with those made by similar leadership in other cities, a few comments seem justified. The relative isolation from a major metropolitan center seems to encourage a strong pride in the community and this pride is reflected in an impatience to get the town moving even better and faster. Certainly each person interviewed expressed his willingness to be "involved".

The next chapter discusses a type of planning program in which these leaders can and should be involved.

CHAPTER III

A RECOMMENDED CITY PLANNING PROGRAM

An Effective Data Collection System

Good planning builds upon facts. Without such facts, carefully gathered and thoughtfully related, a city plan would simply be the substitution of one group's opinion for that of another. And, once gathered, these facts must be kept current if they are to be useful and reliable.

Some basic facts describing present conditions in Fort Myers are now available. Chief among these is the large-scale map of existing land use which is kept current by the Building, Zoning and Planning Department.

There are a number of data maps completed in 1960 which can be updated through field survey and a search of city records. However, this time, in contrast to the 1959 planning program, some one person on the City's staff should be fully informed as to the source, form and reliability of all data gathered so they may be responsible for maintaining this information. A main role of any outside technical consultant should be to train local technicians to perform such necessary continuing functions -- and if necessary to show by example the techniques and methods to be used.

Eventually the City will use (very likely in cooperation with the County) some form of Electronic Data Processing (EDP) to assist in handling those municipal

functions which require the storage and retrieval of information. With this possibility in mind, it is suggested that all data produced by the City's planning program be related, where possible, to a basic identification number, which can usually be the same lot reference used on the City's tax maps. Then, as additional information becomes available concerning that lot (e.g. number of families, condition and age of structure, service by utilities, paved street frontage, housing code inspection findings, etc.) all such related facts can then be punched onto the same card. The end result of such a total information system will be both economy and speed. With such a system, the City can inventory itself in terms of any conditions without costly resurveys and field checks.

Evaluating Present Comprehensive Plan Proposals

At the same time that additional technical studies are underway for planning elements not covered by the 1959-60 effort, the reports and maps which were produced by this past effort should be exposed to review and evaluation by city officials and citizen leaders.

This review should be made more effective by developing a composite map of all the major proposals of the 59-60 Plan. These numerous proposals now shown on various maps will then be in one easily read graphic form where their relation to each other will be easily seen. Such a composite plan map should be presented in color for maximum understanding.

A series of discussion meetings to react to the plan map should then be held. Initially, the Planning Commission and Zoning Board should review it in depth for their own information and reaction. Then, the City Commission should meet jointly with the Planning Commission to give its review and comment. At this point, with the "in the official family" review completed, a series of presentations before civic leadership groups should be scheduled. It should be stressed to such groups that they are not being confronted with a rigid plan, but they are actually being asked to participate in further developing and improving their City's plan.

To spur healthy discussion of the composite plan, the title of the plan map should underscore the fact that the plan is open for comment -- and change, if needed. Such a title might include: "New Directions for Growth, Stage I", "Discussion Points Towards a Master Plan", "A Comprehensive Plan for Fort Myers - A Preliminary Draft", "A Concept Plan for Future Development" - or numerous other titles could be suggested.

Hopefully, the news media will aid the Planning Commission in its effort to move the ideas of the plan into the arena of public discussion. A series of feature stories, each stressing a key aspect of the plan (housing, roads, schools, etc.) would effectively present the planning studies in readable and digestible units.

Following a 3 - 5 month period of leadership review and comment, the Planning Commission will then be ready to modify the plan where needed or at the very

least it will show those issues on which more technical study is called for on its part.

Immediate Planning Efforts Needed

In addition to evaluating the present overall plan, the Planning Commission is charged by the City Commission with carrying on three new planning studies. These three studies are needed for two reasons: (1) the City needs the information and guidance they will provide and (2) without these, the City's Workable Program for Community Development would not be certified and this loss would bar the City from securing additional low rent housing units and from participating in other programs of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

These three new planning studies to be completed prior to October, 1967 are:

1. Analysis and Improvement Program for each major neighborhood of the City. This will include:

start One of the major purposes of the Neighborhood Analysis is to study within the community the nature, extent, and causes of blight on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis. It is an important basic study for the subsequent preparation of detailed neighborhood plans. The neighborhoods in the City of Fort Myers and urban areas are to be delineated on the basis of physical, economic, social, or other characteristics which make for clearly identifiable entities, or on the basis of geographical or natural barriers, man-made barriers, or the area served by a single public facility.

The study report shall consist basically of a text report containing one or more maps showing the neighborhood areas into which the

City of Fort Myers is divided, and one or more maps showing the locations and extents of areas which are in various stages of deterioration and blight. Among other things, the textual portion of the report shall discuss the results of a survey of housing conditions, including the location and extent of blight and potential blight; the results as they apply to the City of Fort Myers and its neighborhoods of the overall survey of community facilities and services made to determine current deficiencies and future needs as a basis for preparing the Community Facilities Plan and the Public Improvements Program; the present conditions and the qualities of the maintenance of such services and facilities as garbage and trash collections, street lighting, and street plantings; the conditions of alleys; traffic circulation patterns; generalized data regarding family size, race, income and the extent of over-crowding of those families who live under substandard conditions in each neighborhood; the basic causes of blight in each neighborhood; actions which are required to eliminate and prevent blight; the types of improvements and remedial actions that should be undertaken; classification of neighborhoods or areas within them by the types of remedial actions required; and a proposed general time schedule for the undertaking of the proposed remedial actions.

2. A Public Improvements Program for a six-year period. This will include:

Capital
The purpose of the Public Improvements Program is to provide the local governing authority or authorities with a program identifying and recommending priorities for all major public improvements needed to meet objectives established in plans for physical development of the Planning Area.

Capital
The Public Improvements Program includes an identification and priority scheduling of public improvements such as parks, playgrounds and other public facilities necessary for carrying out plan proposals. Recommendations as to order of priority, approximate costs, and scheduled time of acquisition or construction are prepared for a six (6) year period, with a general priority and scheduling of recommendations for the succeeding ~~fourteen~~ *eighteen (18)* (14) year period.

copy
As a part of this study, an analysis is made of the financial structure and capability of the local governing authority or authorities of the Planning Area, in order to realistically relate the programmed need for such public improvements to the ability of the local governing authority or authorities to pay for them.

3. Development of a Zoning Regulation.

This will include a complete evaluation of both the City's existing regulations and those suggested regulations produced by the '59-'60 planning program. Based on the weaknesses noted, a new regulation will be drafted to reflect the most effective, overall zoning practice as well as to meet specific situations particular to Fort Myers. Such regulations will be drafted section by section with scheduled review of each section in draft form by local developers and other knowledgeable persons to insure its practicality once adopted.

The interdependence of all parts of the city plan is pointed up by the need to write the zoning requirements so as to carry out the agreed-to-aims of the city's long range plan. For example, if the expressed aim of the City is to encourage light industry - but to be extremely cautious that such plants do not in any way blight the natural beauty of the area - then the industrial provisions of the ordinance would be designed to carry out such a goal. And, along the same line, the Public Improvements Program would reflect the future financial demands on the City for facilities needed to serve and protect the home areas as determined in the Neighborhood Analysis and Improvement Study.

Future Steps in Planning Program

The City is now embarked on a continuing program of urban planning in contrast to a one-shot, one-time effort. This means considering now what planning work will be needed in the future to move the present plan closer to completion and to meet emerging new needs or problems.

Such a planning work program should, of course, first reflect needs; but secondly, it must also reflect the reality of the City's ability to finance such additional planning activity. Towards this practical end, the Planning Commission should strive to mesh its activity with the availability and timing of funds available through various aid programs of the Department of HUD. Such grant programs include:

1. Two-thirds matching funds under the so-called "701" program, to enable the City to carry on needed planning studies. This was the source of funding for the '59-'60 plan. Currently, there is little chance that money will be available through this program in less than one year from applying. Also, it is questionable whether additional monies would be available to update the parts of the City's plan which were originally funded by this "701" money. Such "701" support will likely be limited to planning studies not included in the '59-'60 program - such as an annexation analysis or a waterfront development plan.

2. Two-thirds matching funds to study the need and to develop a program to eliminate the problems of blight and dilapidation in the City through both private and public renewal means. This program of study and action is termed a "Community Renewal Program" or as some cities term it, a "Community Improvement Program".

These are the two most promising sources of funding for planning activity. Currently, the "701" program is very short on funds and therefore discouragingly slow. The CRP program in contrast is more amply financed and could be expected to grant approval of a well-drafted application in from 4 to 6 months. In very crude terms, approximately \$30,000 to \$40,000 might be available from this CRP source and this outside two-thirds would be matched by the City's one-third share, which share could be largely provided in staff services rather than cash.

In outline form below is presented a three phase program of planning activity which is suggested that the City undertake over the next 3 to 5 years.

PHASE I (October, 1966 to October, 1967)

1. Summarize key plan proposals from 1959 - 1960 Plan and present these on large scale map.
2. Review Plan Map (1. above) with City Commission and citizen leadership over a 3 - 5 month period.
3. Prepare Neighborhood Analysis and Improvement Study and report. As part of this analysis, identify prospective areas of the city where any of the various programs of urban renewal (public and private) might be utilized and collect data on these areas in a fashion which will permit the subsequent filing of an application for renewal.
4. Prepare Six-Year Public Improvements Program. As part of this study, identify and estimate cost of all public improvements eligible for credit to the locality's 1/4 share to be located within any potential urban renewal area(s) as identified in the Neighborhood Analysis and Improvements Report.
5. Prepare and file application for "701" local planning assistance (1/3 local, 2/3 Federal) to conduct specific technical studies scheduled for Phase II.

6. Secure state legislation enabling the City to engage in urban renewal activity. Such act to be in the form of a local act based on existing Act of the City of Tampa.
7. Prepare and submit request for recertification of City's Workable Program (Cite accomplishments of Phase I and scheduled work elements in Phase II).
8. Prepare and submit application for Community Renewal Program, if after full discussion by Planning Commission, City Commission and citizen leadership it is agreed that such a program is the logical first step towards public and private renewal of the City's deteriorating business and residential areas.
9. Schedule periodic work sessions with officials responsible for conduct of Lee County's planning studies with the aim of eliminating duplication of effort and the coordination of plans, standards and aims produced by both programs.

PHASE II (October 1967 to October 1968)

1. Develop Study of Economics and Population Growth Potential for the City of Fort Myers and its urban areas with particular reference to identifying the specific types of light industrial uses (including research and development firms) for which the City has appeal.
2. Develop a Staged Plan of Improvement for Downtown Fort Myers which will build upon and update the 1959-1960 CBD Plan and will translate

all plan proposals into a schedule of funding and responsibility allocation directed towards implementation of the plan within a specific number of years.

3. Develop Fringe Area Services which will evaluate the various alternative means, including annexation, to render urban services to those fringe areas contiguous to the City limits. For those areas suggested for annexation, estimates would be prepared of the cost of providing city services to those areas as compared to the yield in terms of taxes, fines, fees and licenses from those same areas. This study to be done in cooperation with Lee County.
4. Prepare and issue report in summary form for public distribution describing the basic proposals of the Comprehensive Plan as these proposals have been updated and modified through the process of leadership review and discussion.
5. Prepare and submit request for recertification of City's Workable Program (cite accomplishments of Phase II and schedule of work in Phase III).
6. Prepare and submit "Survey and Planning Application" for an urban renewal project, possibly to carry out CBD plan, if one is identified by the Neighborhood Analysis as being feasible and desirable and if citizen leadership has discussed and agreed to this remedial program.

7. Commence work under CRP when approved and orient such CRP activity to be of maximum benefit to the other continuing programs of the City (e.g. place relevant data collected on an EDP basis, provide for continuing family relocation service, analyze City's administrative structure, determine programs to spur building of needed low-cost private housing, etc.).

8. File application for specific technical studies suitable and eligible for financing by a Phase II "701" program such as: Determination of Bulkhead Lines, Identification of Open Space Needs with Emphasis on Waterfront Development, Inventory and Evaluation of Industrial Sites, Etc.

PHASE III (October, 1968 to October 1969)

1. Re-evaluate City's complete planning program in light of changes in local conditions and trends and if necessary, reschedule work elements.

2. Continue all studies currently underway: e.g. CRP, U.R., "701" work elements and in general, utilize this year to serve as a plateau of accomplishments during which the City concludes several of the key studies underway and evaluate these results as they relate to each other and to the concurrent planning studies of the County.

To accomplish the work program as described above will require that responsibility for its coordination and impetus be focused in one group. This group is logically the Planning Commission. To be effective in this broad responsibility, the Commission should, on a regular basis, hold review and discussion work sessions with the City Commission and with other key city bodies including the city's Housing Board.

Clearly, the scale of the Planning Commission's future assignments requires that it have available at least part-time technical assistance. The portion of this assistance dealing with long-range planning efforts will, of course, be provided through continuing consulting services. However, the week-to-week demands of the Planning Commission should have the attention of a technical person stationed in the Building, Zoning and Planning Department. Such a technician would concern himself largely with (1) the administration of zoning, (2) future work on the CRP activity, and (3) carrying on current planning studies for the Planning Commission as well as other city departments.