Newsletter of the Southwest Section of the Washington Chapter of the American Planning Association

Columbia Connections

Winter 2010

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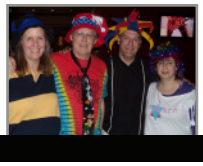

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Crunch Time in Woodland

Tim Brow, Woodland School District, Computer Applications and Robotics Teacher and Lego Robotics Team Coach

The FIRST Lego League (FLL) sponsors an annual worldwide robotics competition open to people ages 8 to 14. Every year's contest has a different theme and in 2009–2010, it was transportation. Each team had to identify and study a transportation issue in its community and propose a solution.

Every afternoon, the members of the Transporjans—the team from Woodland Middle School—take school buses that sit in a traffic jam at the intersection of Buckeye and Goerig streets. The Transporjans decided the traffic jam would be their problem. When they started, they had no idea how complex the problem was and how it would open the world of urban planning to them.

The Transporjans began researching online and soon discovered that they had stumbled onto the periphery of a much larger problem, one that was being examined by planning agencies they had never heard of. They started by getting some background information about school transportation from the folks at the bus barn and invited other experts to speak to them as well. Walt Hansen, a local historian, educated the team on the history of transportation in Woodland and the reasons the intersection developed the way it did. Kei Zushi, a planner with the City of Woodland, and Jerry Sorrell, a traffic engineer with the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments, discussed the ideas that the State of Washington has for a long-term solution. Kei and Jerry astonished and impressed the team when they listened to the Transporjans and then asked if the middle school students had a solution to the traffic jam. Then the actual study began. The team videotaped the intersection during crunch time for five days and measured the length of the traffic backup every minute. They analyzed the videotapes and graphed and studied the data. Right away, the team debunked the idea that the school buses were causing the traffic jam; next they thought perhaps the cause was departing school employees but, when the team surveyed all the school employees, this idea, too, fell away. The team then surveyed all the high school and middle school students. Aha! The team found that 60% of the high school students drove or rode to school every day. This appears to be the source of the daily 20-minute after-school traffic jam.

Now for the solution. Making the turn lane under the freeway into an express lane that changes directions at different times of the day depending on traffic flow was their short-term solution. Removing the sidewalks under the freeway from the state's transportation plan, increasing the traffic lanes under the freeway from five to six, and making two of them dedicated left turn lanes while routing pedestrian traffic through a new tunnel under the freeway, was their long-term solution. The best solution, though, was placing monitors

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Crunch Time, cont'd

on the cars of high school students that would allow the cars to start only at specific times after school, spreading the impact of the students on the intersection. Cars belonging to students with higher grades would start earlier—of course!

The Transporjans presented their ideas first to Kei Zushi and then to two panels of engineers and planners who judged the Lego robotics competition, to the Woodland School District School Board, and to a combined Woodland City Council/Planning Commission meeting. The team also wrote up its research and published it on the school district website at: **http://www.woodlandschools.org/files/pages/wsd/wsd_do/final draft1.pdf.** In addition, team members wrote to all the state and federal legislators from Southwest Washington asking them to consider allocating money to begin the project. The team received quite a few personal replies.

On a number of levels, this was a valuable lesson for the students. The team members learned worthwhile skills—using the scientific method to approach and analyze a problem was, of course, the foundation of their work, but they also learned the ins and outs of setting up a meeting, writing and administering a survey, speaking in public, and writing effective letters to government officials and agencies. Team members also were exposed to today's world of planning and its myriad competing and sometimes conflicting interests.

Economic Slowdown Prompts Local Streamlining

By Chad Eiken, AICP
Planning Review Manager, City of Vancouver

As real estate development activity continues to remain sluggish throughout Southwest Washington, permitting agencies are looking for innovative ways to cut unnecessary red tape in the hopes of stimulating the local economy.

Reducing the review process for development applications means shorter review times and in many cases, lower application fees—two very meaningful incentives when someone is looking to build a new project, or maybe just expand their existing business. Mike Bomar of the Building Industry Association agrees: "The economic slowdown is a great opportunity to review the current code and remove requirements that cause unnecessary delays in projects. The current code places an especially large burden on small projects. This [streamlining effort] has the potential to reduce both direct fees and costs related to delays in permit approvals."

Here are some examples of how local agencies are working to streamline their review processes

Reduce Review and Impact Fees

In some jurisdictions, land use review fees are adjusted annually by the increase in the regional Consumer Price Index (CPI). In the past, this has tended to go up about 2% each year. In 2009, the CPI dropped for the first time in many years, and Vancouver lowered its permitting fees.

Washougal and Stevenson are considering reductions in impact fees through the addition of a Business Enhancement Factor (BEF) to the calculation, which would provide an automatic reduction of up to 30% in impact fees for certain retail uses. (Note: Washougal already adopted a BEF for its Town Center area and Clark County and Vancouver have a 15% BEF for retail uses.)

Increase Permit Exemptions

Most jurisdictions have some type of site plan review process for review of commercial, industrial and multi-family developments. Vancouver is proposing to exempt small parking lots (<10 spaces) and changes in the use of buildings to other permitted uses from having to obtain site plan approval; instead, compliance with zoning requirements would be checked as part of the building or land use permit. Vancouver is also considering exempting fences and certain sheds and decks from both land use and building permits.

Increase Site Plan Thresholds

Local permitting agencies have wide discretion in determining the level of public process for site plan review applications. Typically, site plans are either Type I (staff level review with no public notice or comment) or Type II (public notice, comment, and appeal period). Thresholds between Type I and Type II site plan applications could be adjusted so that a larger number of smaller projects would be reviewed under a Type I process. Vancouver is proposing increases in these thresholds.

Extend Approval Periods

The economic slowdown has resulted in all types of development projects being put on hold, pending financing or a return of consumer demand, or both. Many such projects already have their land use entitlements, and the validity of those approvals may expire after a period of time if no building permits have been issued. Clark County recently extended the 5-year approval period for subdivisions and short plats, so dozens of approved plats would not expire right away. Vancouver is proposing to enact an automatic 3-year extension for preliminary site plan approvals.

Defer Payment of Impact Fees

In most jurisdictions, impact fees for parks, schools, and transportation are collected when building permits are issued. Some agencies are looking at deferring collection of impact fees until the time of occupancy, which is actually when the impacts to these systems would be created. The primary benefit is that developers would not have to carry the interest on the financing of the impact fees while the project is being constructed.

Agencies may have concerns about their legal authority to defer such fees (a bill to clarify when impact fees must be collected is pending at the state legislature) or how to ensure that such fees are paid before occupancy, but several jurisdictions are exploring this, including Woodland, Camas, Battle Ground, and Washougal. La Center has already adopted language that allows impact fees to be deferred to the occupancy stage of the process.

Vancouver Looks to Adjust Site Plan Review Thresholds

By Chad Eiken, AICP
Planning Review Manager, City of Vancouver

A new grocery store is proposed on a vacant lot, or a large manufacturing plant wants to double its size – what review process would your city or county use to ensure that applicable development standards are met and that the public is given an opportunity to comment on the application? In Vancouver, that process is called "site plan review" and it provides a framework for staff to review proposed development plans for compliance with use limitations of the zoning district, setbacks, parking, access, landscaping, lighting, and infrastructure requirements. Once a site plan is approved, it authorizes staff to issue building permits for the project, whenever building plans have been approved.

Vancouver has two types of site plan review applications. For smaller projects, the review (called "Type I site plan review") is administrative and without any public notice or comment period; only the applicant can appeal the decision. If a project exceeds certain thresholds, then it becomes a Type II site plan review, and a public notice is sent to property owners within 500 feet of the project and posted on the site; a 14-day public comment period follows. After staff issues a decision on the project, any aggrieved party with standing may appeal the project to the City's hearings examiner. Typically, a Type I process takes up to 28 days, whereas a Type II process generally takes about 90 days.

Application fees are also much less—by as much as several thousand dollars—for a Type I review. In an effort to streamline its review processes, Vancouver is contemplating increasing the thresholds between its Type I and II site plan processes so that more projects will qualify for a Type I review. Currently all new developments trigger a Type II site plan process, as do changes to existing developments (including changes in use) that result in any of the following: 1) an increase in dwelling unit density of more than 10%; 2) an increase in the floor area of a non-residential structure or use by more than 10%, up to 10,000 square feet; 3) a reduction in the area reserved for open space, recreational facilities, and/or landscaped areas by more than 10%; 4) an increase in the number of existing parking spaces by more than 10% or an increase of more than 40 parking spaces; or 5) an increase in the vehicular traffic to and from the site of more than 50 average daily trips.

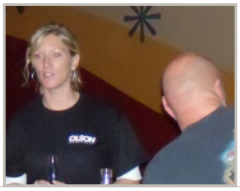
The proposed code changes would double all of the above thresholds (except the daily vehicle trips threshold would increase from 50 to 200 ADT), and would also make all new developments below a certain size (e.g., 10,000 square feet if non-residential or 20 units if residential) subject to a Type I review.

These changes will not be free of controversy, however. The public is used to receiving notices of new developments nearby, and being given an opportunity to voice their concerns, even if the project would comply with every adopted development standard. There may be cases where neighbors first learn of a new project when the construction equipment shows up on the site. The Planning Commission and City Council will have to weigh the benefits of providing an extremely fast and inexpensive review process against the public's expectation that there should be a notice and comment process for most projects.

The proposed changes to the site plan thresholds received a preliminary nod from the Planning Commission at a workshop in February. Interestingly, the Commission directed staff to push the streamlining envelope even further and explore using the same thresholds for requiring a Type II site plan review as those that trigger a SEPA review, which would allow even more projects to be reviewed under a Type I process. The City is also seeking input on this and other ideas from a group of external stakeholders who are "users" of the review process, and will present additional recommendations to the Planning Commission at its March workshop.

Gutterball Classic

On March 3, the Southwest Section held its third annual Gutterball Classic, the section's winter social event, at Big Al's Bowling. About 50 planners and friends competed for the coveted Golden Pin trophy and caught up with colleagues over pizza and frothy beverages. While the Clark County Pin-Heads reclaimed the trophy, the award for best-dressed team went to the City of Vancouver Community Planning Su-jesters. Our thanks go to Group MacKenzie, BergerABAM, and HDR for their support of the event.



The current recession has affected Clark County residential development severely

Gary Albrecht, AICP
Clark County Community Planning

To encourage home building in La Center, the City created an ordinance that makes the payment of impact fees more flexible. The City took this step to avoid imposing undue financial burdens on the residential development industry while ensuring that new development pays the impact fees before new development imposes a new or increased service demand on affected City systems.

For developers, this added flexibility might make building a project more affordable. To build a new home, a developer most likely would obtain a bank loan. Depending on the developer's credit-worthiness, a bank might require a loan-to-value ratio of 80%. To build a home valued at $200,000, the bank would loan 80% or $160,000, so the developer would have to provide 20% or $40,000 in up-front cash. If the City allowed the builder to defer $20,000 in impact fees, the up-front cash required would instead be 10% or $20,000, with a further savings to the developer because interest would not have to be paid over the life of the loan on the deferred $20,000.

To ensure payment to the City, the property owner must execute and consent to the recordation of a lien against the property in favor of the City in the Clark County property deed records in the amount of the impact fees. This lien must be senior to any other lien on the property.

La Center's ordinance also requires the property owner to pay all impact fees in full before:

- The City issues a Certificate of Occupancy or gives a satisfactory final inspection for the dwelling, or
- The property owner sells or otherwise transfers title to the property, or
- The passage of 12 months from the effective date of the agreement, at which time the property owner must pay the impact fees immediately and be fully liable for them.

La Center is working very hard to create a competitive advantage for developers to build new homes in the city. This is a great development incentive for Southwest Washington.

"It's tough to avoid the temptation to send a blistering email back to someone who has offended you, or to post a comment online - however stupid - as soon as the thought is in your head; however, before you do, pause a moment, take a breath and ask yourself the following three questions: 1. Does it need to be said? 2. Does it need to be said by me? 3. Does it need to be said by me, now?"
Craig Ferguson, late-night talk show host and comedian

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