

PLANNING FOR A SUSTAINABLE CLEVELAND

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Photo By: David H. Ellison, AIA

From a planning and redevelopment perspective, what are the most urgent needs within the City of Cleveland?

Can rezoning help us achieve our collective goals?

Cleveland needs a well-articulated statement of direction and objectives that is based a broad understanding and sensitivity to community interests. The vision for the future of our city and our community needs to be updated. Fortunately, much of the current Connecting Cleveland 2020 Citywide Plan remains relevant and includes important concepts we may want to continue to implement. Unfortunately, if present development patterns continue unchecked, they are likely to lead to a loss of cohesion within our communities and degradation of the historic character of our neighborhoods. Any new plan will need to be more inclusive and holistic in its vision than previous plans.

Most Clevelanders want our city to develop its local economy, our neighborhoods and the capacity of city and regional government to respond to increasing cultural complexity. People want a dynamic, resilient local economy, safe and appealing neighborhoods and an environment where government is predictable, just, and provides meaningful opportunities for citizens to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

Architecturally speaking, carefully planned densification and compatible infill will improve the sustainability of these civic attributes. That planning would include preservation of architectural and cultural resources and help develop economic diversity and resiliency.

A new citywide plan would address the collective future of Cleveland's citizens in an ecological manner, where economic health and diversity is central to the issues of infrastructure management, land-use, housing, historic preservation, public health and education, government performance and quality of life.

The word, sustainability, encompassing the concept that activities be conducted in a way that allows their continuation for the foreseeable future, is thrown around as though walking to a nearby restaurant, driving one's car less, or switching to energy conserving light-bulbs fulfills the requirements of a system in a stable-state. How do we refine public understanding of "sustainability" so that it refers to more than energy conservation and lower carbon emissions? Sustainability in its broader, more complete meaning includes the preservation and improvement of the attributes of our democratic form of government, the development and

implementation of scientifically-based public policy, and the protection of fragile assets like air, water, our food supply, cultural memory and the capital investments of previous generations, including older buildings.

In a new city plan, "Historic Preservation" would be included as a central element of an overall strategy aimed at creating a more sustainable environment. It is well-documented that the designation of historic districts tends to cause an improvement in property values and protects existing affordable housing and office space. Preservation contributes to the health and vitality of a place in a variety of other ways. It conserves resources and the embodied energy that is invested in an existing place or building. It preserves the cultural memory of craftsmanship, design ideology and social history. Investment in the rehabilitation and restoration of old buildings even produces more local economic activity than the construction of new buildings, because a greater percentage of the investment tends to be in local labor rather than imported materials. Perhaps most importantly, the preservation of old buildings allows and fosters the essential development of new work, as evidenced in the form of smaller, start-up businesses and new enterprises, because of the lower cost of rent.

In situations where historic preservation or even infill development in sensitive locations becomes a question, reconciliation of private and public interests needs to be mediated by civil institutions in which we invest authority and trust that fairness and justice will prevail. Ideally, block clubs, local review committees, and city boards and commissions provide this opportunity for effective community engagement.

In much the same way, these conflicting interests need to be recognized and the means by which they can be fairly resolved must be part of any new city plan. Neighbors, real estate developers, building owners, preservationists, contractors, designers and the public at large, all need to be confident of an inclusive and fair process, free of undue political influence by moneyed interests or partisan action taken by public servants.

Zoning has served to attach entitlements to specific property owners, restricting the allowable activities of neighbors and limiting the size and configuration of new buildings. As such, zoning regulations directly affect property values and rights and have real consequences to both neighborhoods and private land owners. Variances from these restrictions can become a political act when the commonly accepted requirements of demonstrating practical difficulty and hardship are ignored. On the other hand, too-strict application of the zoning code can be inappropriate in historic areas that pre-date adoption of the code. Responsible infill development in sensitive areas requires separate design guidelines that regulate compatible development. Ideally, a community would have broad consensus on its goals regarding the form of infill development and the intention of its economic impact on the neighborhood. In the absence of such consensus, the means of effective public engagement regarding these questions is even more important.

Shall we rezone Cleveland?....