

Procedural, Submittal and Administrative Items

Cumulative Impact Analysis - what is it and why does it matter?

Any meaningful attempt to address cumulative impact must begin with an appreciation for the fact that nothing involved in the realm of land development happens overnight. The land development process, from conception to completion, can take from one year, at best, to several years. Construction and occupancy follow only thereafter.

Community development is a dynamic process that is not easily ordered and prescribed or placed into neat paradigms. While supply and demand, location, location, location and timing is everything are three of the most basic tenets of real estate investment, in reality, it is local, regional and national macro-economic influences combined with the aggregate decision-making of countless individuals and businesses, acting in their own self-interest, that often leads to a very unpredictable, some might say chaotic environment in which things just seem to happen. Some things happen before our eyes, and others just happen.

I would suggest that on balance, more “things happen” unpredictably in the secondary housing market than in the new homes market. Most developers market, design and build their products specifically for relatively focused segments of the population, with relatively predictable age, income, child-bearing and activity levels associated with those markets. New mixed use neighborhoods also plan for multiple population segments, often in response to proffered commitments made through conditional rezonings. New commercial and industrial development is similarly targeted to specific users.

Conversely, existing neighborhoods that might previously have been designed as starter homes (like some older ranchers) might over time

become more attractive as seniors housing, having only one floor and often located closer to the earlier “urban core” of the community. Older shopping destinations also change their market orientation over time, responding to changes in transportation or new offerings elsewhere in the community. Such transitions can have significant impacts on school age population, commuting patterns and transportation impacts, recreation demands, police and fire protection, tax generation and more.

In the 2005 cash proffer committee, working with Staff of the School Board and the County, we were able to match public school bus ridership data with a variety of other neighborhood statistics to understand differences in school age children generation between newer neighborhoods and older ones. But in that same process, it became clear, to me at least, that in stubborn reliance upon the “make growth pay for itself” mantra, we lost sight of the impacts arising from changes that eventually occur in the County’s previously developed properties over time. And since the inventory of existing homes and business facilities at any given time is larger than the approved but as yet unbuilt development on the books, we have not really been looking to the greatest source of both positive and negative community impact, and opportunity. That is, those of us who are already here. How we interact, what demands we place on our government and on each other, to what degree we are willing to compromise for the greatest public good – these factors, day in and day out, make the community what it is, for better or for worse.

Addressing this dichotomy in a balanced way is important because the community’s schizophrenia over continued development versus maintenance of the status quo reflects a deep division in our region. These are largely present-oriented perspectives and each has its merits. Having an operational, collective future-orientation, however, is much

more difficult. Perhaps there is but one thing on which we can all agree: the only thing that is constant is change.

If we are to get a handle on change in our community, and the future it portends, we must look first to ourselves and to our demands on our government. Then, we must look at our government and understand and account for how it spends our tax dollars. Only then can we fairly begin to set forth the expectations we have for those who will come later. Presumably, such soul searching will lead us all to an equitable and sustainable way of paying for our collective future.

Cumulative impact analysis is a catchy phrase, and it suggests that the complex interconnections between people and places, their homes, their cars, their jobs, their schools, the water we drink, the pollution we create, the very fabric of our community, can be understood through a series of spreadsheets and algorithms. These algorithms might become policies, and the policies might become actions, or inactions. But as useful as such analyses might be, we must ask ourselves, throughout this community, are we part of the problem or are we part of the solution? How do our actions, or inactions, contribute to the betterment or degradation of our community? How can we make a positive difference? Getting involved, working collaboratively with those of opposing views to understand and shape the broader issues of community development, not arguing across the aisle over specific zoning and SUP cases, this can be our future. Sign me up.