

The Bigger Picture **by Bruce G. Boncke, P.E., President**

For the past year, I have been the Chairman of the National Home Builders' Association Land Development Committee. I will pass that position on and remain active on the committee. For the past two years, I have been President of the New York Planning Federation and I have passed on that position to a successor. For the National Home Builders' Association, I will now go on to be the National Vice President for New York and New Jersey. I will be our industry's representative on the U.S. Transportation Research Board's Pipeline Safety Committee, the NYS Quality Communities Downtown Revitalization sub committee, and the New York State and Rochester Home Builders' Association's Environmental, Legal Defense and Government Relations Committees.

Those that know our firm and me well know that I participate in these activities out of a passion for the homebuilding and development industry. As we often struggle with local development projects and issues, I have found great value to our clients and employees from the Statewide and Nationwide perspectives this participation has given us. So, as I now leave some of these positions, I wanted to share some bigger picture observations I have made from my involvement.

Sprawl and Growth: If you define sprawl as uncontrolled, unplanned growth (as the predominant definition), it simply does not exist in our area or most of New York State. Our regulations, planning procedures and environmental sensitivity are some of the most stringent, compared to those around the country. Often, as growth and environmental issues are discussed at a national level, I am often in a "been there; done that" position. In New York State, we often deal with development issues upfront, rather than retroactively as many high growth states are now doing. We live in virtually a no-growth state that only builds a yearly amount of housing units in the entire state equal to what many "metropolitan areas" build, yet we have to keep hearing about our sprawl! Also, contrary to some belief, the balance between growth and infrastructure needs in our region is far better than in most other areas of the state and country. One last observation is that growth is good vs. the alternative of no growth. Around our country, there are more communities suffering from the consequences of no growth and stagnation than those dealing with the challenges of growth.

Innovation: One of the most frustrating observations is the lack of innovative zoning and planning in our region and state. We have the tools and enabling legislation to be creative, but we get buried in the SEQR Law and "character of the area" issues while the rest of the country passes us by. One of the most important planning concepts in the country right now is mixed use development, and we need to get up to speed with our local zoning codes to allow them. I recently had the privilege of judging projects for the smart growth development category Best in American Living Awards (BALA). As I reviewed the projects, I was disturbed by the thoughts that the majority of the projects would not be allowed or approved in our region and what we are missing. That's probably why only one application was from New York State. However, to the credit of the many private and public individuals involved, Anthony Place in the City of Rochester, won a BALA award last year.

Education: I have observed areas of the country that are begging for growth and others that can't close the barn door quick enough. The universal bottom line around the country on bad growth attitudes is a lack of education and communication. Much of the education needs to start with the public officials and planning representatives in the communities. In national settings, I often describe the education and training efforts of the Monroe County Department of Planning and Economic Development, the New York Planning Federation and others in our state. I get many requests for information on training programs and come away feeling we are ahead of the curve on this one.

Influence of Politics: The influence of politics on development, particularly housing, scares me both locally and across the country. Housing is one of our most important needs, yet it is arguably the most over-regulated industry in our country. Thirty years ago, I was naive enough to believe that, in our communities, there was a legislative body that put zoning codes in place, and a Planning Agency to enforce those codes and protect public health safety and welfare as part of the approval process. I was taught that the two were to avoid political interaction. Wrong! Our NYS SEQR EAF forms even ask the question "is there any public controversy regarding the project?" That's not planning or environmental protection, that's politics. Very recently, a local court overturned a Planning Board's decision largely based on them allowing public opinion to override the facts, design and merits of the project. Finally, a case acknowledging frequent political misuse of the SEQR Law!

Insurance: New York State is the leader in what is becoming a nationwide insurance crisis and that's nothing to be proud of. We are the only state in the country that doesn't have a negligence clause in our labor law and it's killing our businesses. Of the NAHB top ten critical issues for builders, liability insurance cost and availability are #1 & #2. Across the country, this will first show up as affecting the cost of buildings and homes and will affect affordable housing the most. In New York State, we are beyond that and are now affecting your ability to even find a builder, framer or roofer. For those that don't want growth, they will likely get their wish for this reason alone.

Housing Affordability: We seem to be behind the curve a bit in our area, and somewhat throughout New York State, on awareness of the need for affordable housing. Much of our country, particularly in high growth areas, is well aware of the need for a mix of housing types that include the ability for service workers, retirees and our children to live in the community. Many communities in the country, are including in their zoning, requirements for a minimum mix of affordable housing in development projects. Many of the projects that received BALA Smart Growth Awards acknowledged and included a mix of affordable and workforce housing. By comparison, our region still seems obsessed with a "bigger is better" mentality and "character of the area" issues. We continuously rezone for larger lots, less density and more open space, and wonder why teachers, volunteer firemen, nurses, etc. can't find a place to live in our communities. We have to join the rest of the country and get smart before we can grow smart. I am, however a realist and understand there is no perfect formula that works universally for all communities. Diversity is, in fact, the real "character of the area" and our country.

In closing, I want to sell you something. The NAHB Advocacy Group and Land Development Committee publish the Land Development Magazine. It is one of the best-kept secrets in the industry and needs to be more widely read. The magazine is very informative and success story oriented. I often provide copies of it when I am in the heat of the battle situations and need people to refocus on the larger perspective. We are providing subscription information and highly recommend you consider a trial subscription.