

Moratoriums

by Bruce G. Boncke, P.E., President

The dynamics of the Planning, Development and Housing industries are changing quickly and, for the most part, for the better. As Bob has pointed out in his article, the improvement in communication and education between builders and our communities is very encouraging. However, there is a significant cloud hanging over us and it's Moratorium Fever. Across our state and in many local communities, politicians are rushing to put development moratoriums in place in response to prevailing NIMBY attitudes to close the barn door.

The American Heritage and Merriam-Webster Dictionaries provide the following definitions for moratorium:

- A suspension of ongoing or planned activity.
- An authorized period of delay in the performance of an obligation.
- A waiting period set by an authority.
- A suspension of activity.

Based on these definitions, I find development moratoriums to be somewhere between ironic and a flat out oxymoron. Community planning and vision should be an ongoing, educational and communicative process. But, often it is not, until some faction in a community has a cause and decides they should stop everything while they think! With little respect for property rights, land values or people who need to run a business, such as providing homes, the solution is to stop. I find it very ironic that these definitions refer to suspending or delaying "ongoing or planned activity", "obligation" and "activity." Experience shows that most moratoriums are put in place because there has been insufficient planning activity and some form of catch up is necessary.

The real irony is with the perception, of the public, of the moratorium. The politicians imposing them appear as heroes and presumably gain future votes. The public perception is that the politicians are doing a great job if they suspend the activity of growth. The reality is that, if a moratorium is truly necessary, it is probably a failure of the political body to meet the obligation for ongoing planning in the community, in the first place. How many constituents in the community would be happy with a moratorium on their business or personal land use because someone needed to stop, think and catch up for a while?

So, what's my point in being a bit more negative than usual? The point is that moratoriums are a failure in our system and we need to get to some better common ground before one is necessary. Builders and developers need to get involved in the planning and education efforts in the communities they work in. Likewise, the communities need to involve the builders and developers in their, hopefully ongoing, comprehensive planning process. After all, it is the building industry that will ultimately have to implement the community plan and vision. I have yet to see a moratorium that was healthy for improving this necessary communication process.