Social Engineering
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I am trying to figure out, at what point in my career the concept of protecting Health, Safety and Welfare turned into Social Engineering. The reality is, that there is likely no milestone event that occurred. It has probably been a scope creep, over many years, in our communities.

I have always been interested in "Powers and Duties" issues as they relate to decision-making boards in our communities. My understanding of those powers and duties is that they are intended to protect the "Health, Safety and Welfare" of the public. However, it seems that often the approval process for a development project evolves into telling people how they should live, or worse, protecting themselves from each other. Terms, such as: character of the neighborhood, traffic calming, connectivity, sense of neighborhood, exclusionary zoning and livability didn't seem to enter into the approval process under protecting Health, Safety and Welfare, years ago! The development industry is an industry of growth. It is also very challenging and stressful. To help keep my sanity, I collect development cartoons and humorous quotable quotes from approval experiences in communities. A few excerpts from those quotes may help make my point about Social Engineering. You can decide if these involve protecting Health, Safety and Welfare, or are Social Engineering:

- A Planning Board member requests that a developer provide $100,000 of curbed planting areas in the middle of a parking lot to keep people from cutting diagonally across the painted parking aisles. After all, they reason, it's only money and people don't follow the parking lot striping any way. Then the member goes on to say that she is "one of the worst offenders of the practice of cutting across them!"

- A community in our area tries to exclude a certain social class of people by using the SEQR process to deny a project approval. The decision was not based on the merits of the design. The judge who corrected that action said, "This case represents a classic example of a Planning Board, which succumbed to community opposition to a project and failed to base its decision on substantial evidence." Not exactly humorous, but a great example of Social Engineering!

- A Conservation Board chairperson says "Technically, I don't know what I'm doing; you are the expert. But, I don't like what you are proposing."

- An architectural review board (probably not even a legal/ empowered entity) requires specific architectural details on a building. The developer complies. A Planning Board member expresses concern for the safety of passing motorists that will be distracted by looking at the beauty of the structure.

When we start combining planning and moderating politics that try to keep all the voters happy all the time, it shouldn't surprise me that Social Engineering is shadowing Health, Safety and Welfare. The following are a few of my observations:

- The 800 ft. cul-de-sac! Many communities have a restriction on the length of a cul-de-sac before a second access is required. Can any of those communities tell you why? Probably not. Is it because they can't cite any studies showing there are safety or welfare issues? In the 35 years that I have been asking, I have not seen any study that indicates length or a specific number of houses are a safety threshold. However, a "Residential Streets" guidance publication suggests that cul-de-sac's over 25 units lose a sense of neighborhood. But, it doesn't consider that this loss is as much a factor of lifestyle issues as subdivision design. So, is mandating cul-de-sac length Health, Safety, Welfare or a Social Engineering attempt to get neighbors to be more neighborly? Cul-de-sac length regulations seem to be little more than a measure to restrict development and density.

- I am always amused when university professors, who have never designed a development project or put anyone in a home, prepare studies on how people should live. One recent study shows our area as one of the worst on their "sprawl index" and cites a lack of "connectivity" as a reason. I'm not sure I even understand the definition of connectivity, but personally, I think our builders and communities pay quite a lot of attention to connections between developments. The reality is, the buying public wants to be <u>less</u> connected to each other than these university professors think they should be.

- Traffic calming is one of the most incredible Social Engineering concepts of the last decade. The philosophy is to make irresponsible drivers drive responsibly by putting obstacles in their way. Although a project, itself, may not have an adverse effect on Health, Safety and Welfare, apparently the people that move into it may. So, we are required to design ways and increase development costs to cure

irresponsibility. The obstacles, increased turning movements, driver's visibility and confusion are all a gift to accident litigation attorneys that already have an adverse effect on our industry. I am not promoting irresponsibility. I am, however, suggesting that all of the costs and obstacles of traffic calming are likely not going to cure it.

- "Character of the Area" issues, that often enter into the approval process, are often the best examples of Social Engineering. This is where politics enters the approval equation and where the intent of Health, Safety and Welfare tend to get lost in the process. A changing society, housing market changes and communities themselves, are requiring that the developments of the future will be different. So why shouldn't they be different than the "Character of the Area?" This is often a translation for not making the homes or lot sizes smaller than the neighbors! Social Engineering around the status quo is likely a poor vision for the future of a community.

We need to get back to the basics of understanding the Powers and Duties of decision making boards regarding Health, Safety and Welfare. The costs of Social Engineering are seriously effecting the ability to provide workforce housing and housing for our children.