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## Reflections on the Master Planning Process in Frankfort

By: Bruce Ogilvie, MCP

Chair, Frankfort Planning Commission

*Every year, through the **Helen S. Willis Outstanding Commissioner Award**, MAP recognizes a planning commissioner for their commitment to advancing or promoting the cause of planning in the public arena. Established in 1994, this award was named to honor the vast contributions Helen S. Willis made to MSPO (now MAP) during her 10 years as executive director. At the 2011 Planning Michigan Annual Conference, Bruce Ogilvie was recognized for his work as Planning Commission Chair of the City of Frankfort and the leadership he provided throughout their master planning process. We asked Bruce to summarize some of the highlights and challenges that he encountered during that time, to share with you.*

Serious master planning takes time and preparation. In 2007, Frankfort faced the opportunity to plan. The challenge: How to use a volunteer planning commission without professional leadership or consultancy, to move from inertia to action.

In 2005, the planning commission began a process of review. We learned through discussion with one consultant that an indicator of problems in the City's plans and Zoning Ordinance was the frequency of Zoning Board of Appeals meetings and granted exceptions. In our case the ZBA was in session too many times a year. Without ending with any formal decision to amend or modify the existing documents, we learned that with our public becoming more engaged and committed to planning, the City needed a Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance that were more enforceable and actually enforced.

The entire history of these five years is complex and extensive, involving many meetings, phone calls, and intervening official business of the planning commission – reviewing site plans, requests for special uses and ministerial duties that so often monopolize our monthly schedules. As we began, we needed to identify issues that would have to be confronted throughout the process.

We would need to:

- Challenge each part of the City to think about the future.
- Provide direct issues of development, redevelopment, spacing, appearance and accessibility.
- Redefine the relationship of the individual to their City and make clear that each voice would be heard and listened to in the planning process.
- Overcome the resistance to change.
- Provide each section of this small city with a simulation of what in-fill development and build-out might look like if the current Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance were implemented, as written.

In March 2008, as the newly elected Chair of the Planning Commission, and with assistance and support from the commission, we began an aggressive review with the purpose of meeting the state mandated five year review, and updating the documents to meet the new Planning and Zoning Enabling statutes.

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Through an informal build out analysis and review of the tax rolls, we determined that through our existing density based, Euclidian type zoning the number of residential buildings in the City and the size of our population could double. With that information in hand, an analysis of where that growth would occur and what public infrastructure might be required was examined. We began to ask how the community could accommodate and adapt to the potential of so many more people?

Community accommodation often involves the potential for change – changing neighborhoods, roads, pathways, traffic patterns, pedestrian expectations for safe access, and many additional issues of health, safety, and welfare for the residents – issues that planning commissions are required to plan for in the master plan. Because so much change was being considered, it was important to get the public to attend planning commission meetings, and to gain community consensus and “buy-in.”

The details of our public involvement would cover many pages; sufficient to share that because of the involvement of the community through eight public meetings between January and June 2009, the Planning Commission had the opportunity to challenge the status quo and move people out of their comfort zone with considerations of what change might bring to their neighborhood, their street, even their home. One hundred-fifty people attended these sessions, sharing their reaction to the build out analysis, the potential changes, and what they expected of and for their city.

With the compiled responses of what people valued in their section of the city: the Main Street businesses, the industrial areas, recreational parks, and waterfront areas, we could formulate a few ideas of the changes and considerations that we should examine as a planning commission. Notably, during this time the State Enabling Legislation for planning and zoning regulations had changed, requiring substantial modification of the documents. Combine the state mandated updates with the potential for protracted discussions and the Planning Commission began to seek assistance and published a RFQ (Request for Qualifications). The City then applied for a DNRE Coastal Zone Management Grant to help finance a complete, professional assessment of the existing documents, including the required five year review, build-out analysis, and written surveys.

As a result of the RFQ, the City received eight qualified responses. The contract with Wade Trim Consultants was executed in December 2008, and the first meeting with City Council and the Planning Commission was held in mid-January 2009. A vigorous schedule was then undertaken to have the full assessment completed by April 15, 2009. Wade Trim, along with the Planning Commission, created a written survey to be completed by the community. It was made available in print and also put on the City website for electronic scoring. Over 200 people completed the six-page survey, including 50 high school age students. The follow-up meeting with the general public in early March set the stage for a well publicized and promoted “Vision Fair”, where for three hours on a Saturday morning, the planning commission’s understanding of the future of the City was confirmed and expanded through 49 resident’s views and involvement.

In April 2009, Wade Trim presented the official assessment and recommendations, along with the five year review analysis, build-out analysis and proposal for a ‘fast track’ master plan and resulting zoning

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ordinance creation, to be completed in less than twelve months. Most people could not believe our schedule. Evidence reviewed from other communities showed that twenty-four to thirty-six months might be needed, and about \$165,000 in consulting fees.

May to December 2009 was to be spent on the details and fine-tuning of our master plan, including public input as each section of the plan was created. A special committee of planning commissioners and public members was appointed to review, research and report on these sections. An example was the creation of a subcommittee on “home occupations.” In the Zoning Ordinance, the initial wording about “home occupations” was very traditional and prescriptive – including all the “must’s”, “shouldn’t’s” and “can not’s” of using a residence for a home occupation or profession. The subcommittee wanted to find a much more pro-entrepreneurial, incubator based wording that would allow zoning codes that were not narrow and restrictive.

This same motivation ruled the change from “Euclidian” based density defining zones, toward “form-based” methodology that looked for the appearance to be compatible and harmonious, while allowing mixed uses within the context of the area. Particularly in our seeking in-fill development, our older neighborhoods were not as homogeneous as what the density based zone implied. Our survey of the city found incomplete and conflicting applications of zoning rules, often a small, quickly built duplex with a very flat roof line, closely built to or immediately abutting a Victorian three-story “painted lady” with great historic value. In some instances grandfathering rules had been used to allow expansion and extensions of non-conforming buildings to encroach on the existing zoning, side yards, setbacks, etc. The advantage of form-based zoning code is the extensive use of pictures to describe and visualize site development and building requirements. The use of check listings and easily understood comparisons leads to better appreciation and understanding of the planning and development process. It creates a built-in check list that is easy to see.

It’s important to note that these unconformities can make a small town comfortable and unique --- don’t lose the focus that people live here and interact within this landscape of disjointed buildings and interconnected streets and alley-ways. Because of the citizen attachment to the current land(and building)scape, we measured each potential new standard against four principle benchmarks, to accommodate the needed public buy-in to the efficacy of the process and its goals:

1. Preserve the city’s character as a small, rural town;
2. Protect all the natural resources and environment;
2. Protect the access and view of lakes, and;
3. Promote the business resources and opportunities that make this a completely self-sustaining town.

The modern theory of city planning included the use of the Duany urban-to-rural *transect* model to explain and define our community’s need to move from density based zoning models to the new urbanism form-based model. We learned in the process of educating the citizens, that our development pattern was inconsistent with these modern standards.

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We also learned that our challenges and opportunities, while many, were not insurmountable. We could develop an action plan to update and make the city attractive for new development through consistency and resources available to modern planning. During this time the Grand Vision Regional Planning activity was paralleling our work through their community meetings. Many of our citizen participated in the meetings, and brought back to our city what they learned and helped implement new urbanism concepts within our plan, to meet the great regional plan evolving in the six county region.

The time period for completion from original assessment beginning in January 2009, to conclusion of our Master Plan adoption, on May 10, 2010, and our Zoning Ordinance adoption, on February 25, 2011, was just over twenty-five months.

It is important to note that our community does not have a professional planning department. That we created a community supported Master Plan through citizen participation is important to note. The challenge presented by this process is staying on schedule. The entire process from assessment to zoning ordinance adoption took five months longer than our original schedule. However, we are informed by professional planners that our twenty-five months is good compared to the average 24-36 month time frame for most comprehensive activities. The citizen and planning commission interactivity evolved over this time, building a trust relationship that extends into the present day. The advantage of this interaction, and education development, is a more sophisticated and informed citizenry that is more likely to be trusting of the actions of the Planning Commission.

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*Bruce Ogilvie, MCP, currently serves the City of Frankfort as Chair of the City Planning Commission, member of the Zoning Board of Appeals, and he is a member of the Solid Waste Advisory Council for Benzie County. He attended Monmouth College (IL), Northwestern University (IL), the American College (PA), Northwestern Michigan College, and Michigan State University – earning degrees in History, Government, Religion, Accounting, Business Law, Finance, Planning, Insurance and the Master Citizen Planner designation in 2008.*