

Vermont Environmental Report

The State Planning Office

"The Concern For Planning is Economic"

A New Mission

"The Governor's concern for planning is economic." This is the comment of Leonard Wilson, former Director of the State Planning Office, who is quick to add that the "Governor is sincerely concerned about the compatibility of economic development and environmental quality."

Despite Wilson's feeling that the Governor has strong environmental concerns, it seems hardly accidental that John Simson, the man whom Governor Snelling has appointed as Director of the State Planning Office, was past Commissioner of Housing & Community Affairs in the Agency of Development & Community Affairs. After all, it is jobs and economic development that are among the chief objectives of the Snelling Administration, and Development & Community Affairs is the Agency charged with carrying the torch for development projects.

"The new mission of the Planning Office reflects the growing role of the Governor as financial manager," Leonard Wilson explains. Snelling's aim of making the Planning Office the coordinating agency within state government reflects the Governor's perception of the need to develop a planning framework for the financial management of the state's affairs. "A businessman," Wilson says, "would want to use the planning staff to find out what the divisions of government were up to and what strategies they were employing to meet their objectives."

The Planning Office Since 1963

Curiously enough, the mission of the Planning Office today seems not so different from when it was first established by Governor Hoff in 1963. The need for a State Planning Office first became apparent after Phil Hoff was elected Governor in November 1962. Hoff found himself suddenly confronted with the task of putting together a state budget. Faced with requests from departments of state government for appropriations, Hoff felt the need for more direction. And a State Planning Office was created.

Since its founding in 1963, the Planning Office has taken on many responsibilities. In the late 1960's, the Planning Office turned its attention to the task of organizing the state's 13 regional planning commissions and assisting Vermont's 246 towns and cities in dealing with problems of local planning and zoning.

Then came the land development crisis of the early 1970's with the threat of massive, uncontrolled land subdivision in southern Vermont communities such as Wilmington and Dover. Deane Davis, a Republican Governor was at the helm, and the Davis Administration and the General Assembly responded to the land development crisis with the passage of Act 250. Act 250 created a State Environmental Board, nine District Environmental Commissions, and legal process for reviewing land development proposals.

And important element of Act 250 was the provision for three additional land use planning steps: an **Interim Land Capability & Development Plan**, a **Capability & Development Plan**, and the third and final step of a **State Land Use Plan**. This ultimate step, though hotly debated by successive legislatures in the 1970's, was never passed into law.

Public Disenchantment with State-Directed Planning

Much has been written about the unwillingness of the General Assembly to pass a State Land Use Plan.

According to Leonard Wilson, many Vermonters were distressed when they found that their land was being divided on a map by arbitrary lines denoting land use categories. "Why should this part of my land be zoned for 'development' and an immediately adjacent parcel be zoned for 'agriculture'?" The lines on the map didn't make any sense to people. And Wilson goes on to say, "The people who pounded on the table and said this was **state zoning** were right. I think this was understood, that [state-wide zoning] was what Act 250 was proposing."

About this period, Wilson says, "It got to be a very muddled, unpleasant fight." Governor Salmon stayed with the idea of a State Land Use Plan until it became very clear that it had no chance of being approved by the legislature. When the land use

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