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Costello-Boeckel exchange explores need to plan for land development's *cumulative* impacts

Edited by Katherine Watt

Back in late-September 2017, Mike Costello initiated an email exchange with Mark Boeckel, Principal Planner, Centre Region Planning Agency, edited for clarity and reprinted here.

Costello contacted Boeckel on Sept. 20, writing:

I'm just a local guy with a very generalized inquiry about the current growth rate in the region. I think it's fair to say this rate is unprecedented and I was just wondering if there was anyone tasked with identifying the resulting challenges and then formulation of a plan to tackle them?

I'm assuming that there is general acknowledgement that the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan and the associated Regional Growth Boundary in the context of full build-out, is not designed as a solution to this unprecedented growth rate.

I'm also assuming even the most experienced urban planners would not be able to foresee, with any degree of certainty, the demands on all our urban systems once all the current projects already approved come online.

Boeckel replied on Sept. 22:

I am not aware of any one individual or agency having been tasked by the Centre Region elected officials to cumulatively assess all potential challenges related to the current rate of growth in the Region.

Longer term planning and budgeting to accommodate forecast growth is incorporated into the individual capital improvement programs and budgets of the municipalities and authorities that provide public services in the region.

The municipalities and authorities communicate on a regular basis with each other to plan for region-wide improvements and often coordinate efforts where practicable.

Specific improvements required to serve new development are assessed during the land development review process.

When a new project is proposed, staff from the Centre Region municipalities, the Centre Region Council of Governments, public service providers, and state agencies (when applicable) attempt to quantify the impacts that individual projects will have on the overall system and identify necessary improvements to address those impacts.

While new development can create unforeseen challenges, those charged with reviewing new development proposals attempt to proactively quantify potential impacts and necessary mitigation based on the best information available.

I'd also like to address your comment regarding the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan, the Regional Growth Boundary (RGB), and its relation the current rate of growth in the Centre Region.

The Regional Growth Boundary was first established in the 2000 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan as a growth management tool.

The 2013 Comprehensive Plan states that the majority of future growth in the Region should be directed to areas within the boundary. This allows areas outside of the boundary to retain their rural character with lower development densities while ensuring that public services are concentrated within the boundary, avoiding costly extensions to serve unplanned growth.

This boundary was not established with an urban services capacity in mind, but rather as a location where urban services to meet future development would be provided.

Much of the area included in the RGB in the 2000 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan was already developed and utilizing urban services or was zoned for such development. The Centre Region elected officials have only approved several minor expansions to the RGB since it was first identified in the 2000 plan.

Other than the period just after World War II, the Centre Region's population has generally grown at a rate of one to two percent annually. It may be fair to say that the current amount of construction in the Centre Region is unprecedented.

Based on available data, the current population growth rate appears to be consistent with historic population growth rates in the Region.

Costello responded:

Thanks, Mark, for a timely and detailed reply.

I'd like to focus on just one follow up inquiry, that I believe, based on your reply, that we may very well be in agreement about.

You mentioned the focus of most government agency review and mitigation requirements is on specific developments.

You also mentioned that the establishment of the Regional Growth Boundary was not designed to account for urban services capacity.

This methodology of planning I believe is the norm.

Although not a student of the urban planning process, I am fairly certain Naples, Florida, for example, had a similar method in place when I first visited and then lived there in the early 1990s.

The absence of a method to look at the totality of all the new developments (with a focus only on impacts of each distinct development), led to a marked decline in the overall quality and character of the Naples metro area.

Do you share the same concerns as I do that if the demand for more housing and related commercial activity continues at its current pace, that the current site-specific planning methodology will be inadequate?

Finally, if you do share those same concerns, is there anything that can be done as a remedy?

My fear, born of some hard-learned lessons in Naples and a number of other communities around the US, is that even if you agreed with me that a more comprehensive approach is now required (admitting the current approach did work well until recently), its implementation would be quite difficult.

The independent nature of each municipality and the mostly advisory role of the Centre Region Planning Agency when it comes to region-wide planning may simply preclude a viable response to our new and growing challenges.

Boeckel responded:

In regards to your comments about reviewing development plans individually, it has been my experience that plan reviewers try to assess the impacts that individual developments will have on their systems while also taking into account the impacts that have been identified in the review of recent developments as well.

Impacts are not limited only to those on site but may include needed upgrades elsewhere in the system.

I think it is fair to say that reviewers are typically cautious to not underestimate impacts from proposed development, as the most appropriate time to assess and require mitigation is during the development approval process.

While reviewing new land development plans concurrently could potentially provide some benefits when assessing potential impacts, there are several reasons why this methodology would be difficult to implement.

Land development plans are submitted at the discretion of the developers, which means that the review of new development proposals may not overlap.

While there have been several large developments proposed and approved in the region over the past few years, most plans for these recent developments were submitted at different times.

In addition to being submitted at different times, the nature and complexity of the reviews for these proposals varied based on what was being requested or proposed. In some cases, rezoning requests preceded the submission of a land development plan while other projects were permitted "by right" based on the existing zoning designation.

Once a subdivision or land development plan is submitted, municipalities have a limited amount of time in which they must take action.

Based on the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), municipalities must act upon development proposals within 90 days unless a written extension is provided. If a municipality failed to act within 90 days (approval or denial) and an extension was not provided, the development plans would be considered approved under the MPC, regardless of their conformity to local ordinances. Municipalities and public service providers try to complete timely reviews to ensure that developers are able to make necessary plan changes as soon as possible.

As I mentioned in my previous response, Centre Region municipalities and service providers regularly conduct long range planning for their individual systems and utilize their individual capital improvement programs to plan and pay for large scale improvements that are required to accommodate future growth and to address impacts that are the result of accumulated demand on their systems over time.

The municipalities and authorities communicate on a regular basis with each other to plan for region-wide improvements and often coordinate efforts where practicable.

Costello concluded the exchange:

Thanks again for another detailed reply.

Maybe I'm just naturally inclined to see the proverbial glass as half empty and your reply indicates you see it as half full. Meaning we both foresee some large potential challenges in coming years, and your focus is on the tools you have to mitigate those, whereas my focus is on the intractability those challenges present.

Maybe I'm just sad knowing how this story ends if the current demand levels remain. Many of the coordination efforts you described and the attempts "...to assess the impacts that individual developments will have on their systems while also taking into account the impacts that have been identified..." were also part of planning process in Naples as previously mentioned, along with Tampa, Las Vegas, Seattle-Tacoma, Myrtle Beach, and the San Francisco Bay area – some other towns I've resided in over the past 38 years.

Some of these growth challenges may even be more acute here, as there remains a strong desire to keep the small town feel of State College.

For this reason, for example, a suggestion made years back that South Atherton should be expanded – so that it was four lanes throughout – was rejected.

Maintaining a viable downtown transport network in the face of all the surrounding growth will be quite difficult.

Efforts at mitigation will be made ever more difficult and of limited effect as traffic volumes build.

One can witness this even today by looking at a current traffic map of the area. As I was writing this midday on October 6, 2017, the PA511 road map showed lots of red

markings indicating heavy traffic conditions in a number of areas around town.

I think it would be beneficial if we hold off approval of any further large developments until we can see the effects of completion of all currently approved plans.

Unfortunately, the benefit of such an idea is exceeded only by the unlikeliness of getting the municipalities to approve it.

So these realities leave me to ask if just two things can be part of future planning efforts.

First, I ask that additional region-wide mitigation efforts begin sooner rather than later.

For example, the Centre Area Transportation Authority (CATA) should be asked to budget for turnouts to be built on all roads they service that are or soon will be stressed.

The curviness of Waupelani Drive, for example, already lends itself to dangerous driving conditions as motorists try to pass stopped buses. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) should be asked to do road construction during evenings only, as any inconvenience to nearby residents becomes far outweighed by much larger impact on daytime traffic conditions.

All municipalities should be asked to assess and report traffic impacts of new developments; I think I heard Ferguson Township does this, but Patton Township currently does not.

Second, I ask that the public be kept informed of key effects of the collective development approvals.

We have a fairly educated resident population who could probably come to understand what "Level of Service" (LOS) letter ratings mean for any given roadway. For the public to be informed that, for example, Atherton Street or College Avenue is projected to go from a B rating, to a C rating in the second half of 2018 and then a D rating in 2021 (I'm guessing possible scenarios) would hopefully lead to more informed decision-making.

If I had to point to one thing lacking in all those other communities in which I've lived, it was a lack of clear, easy to read information about the projected COLLECTIVE effects of all currently approved projects made available to the general public.

The fact that such developments are not concurrent I would hope would not preclude such an effort.

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