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WHY IS LAND USE POLICY IMPORTANT NOW?

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Why is land use policy important now? Because the citizen is now the key word. Planning and land use policies have been topics of conferences, studies, budgets, and books for quite some time, but the planning of what to do with the landscape has been done *for* people, not *by* people. Communities no longer grow by hand labor but are built. The materials are manufactured. The tools are bulldozers, earthmovers, and machines. A different decision-making process is at work.

With all the planning for the public health, safety, and well-being, the public which has usually been off at work, has no idea of what is going on until they meet some plan head on as a personal crisis affecting them.

So why is land use policy important now? Because it is becoming more and more evident that land use changes which are made at the national, state, regional, and local levels of government are affecting the economy, the environment, and most important, the lives of people.

About a year and a half ago, a public information meeting was held by the Souris Red Rainy River Basin Commission in the Upper Midwest. It was held in the courthouse of one of the counties on the Red River, a river subject to flooding, low flows, and pollution problems. There were county commissioners, village officials, farmers, and a few other local citizens—enough to fill the courtroom. The chairman, in good faith, described the planning function of the commission. He told of a bus tour of that part of the river basin. He spoke of the representatives of the federal agencies that took the time to personally see the study area. After he completed his description, he was asked, Who were the local people they talked to? The answer was no local contacts had been made during the tour. The discussion became a lively dialogue. More questions were asked. Of greater consequence, the commission was granted funds for public relations and additional time to include local review in their studies.

The Upper Midwest may not be so different from the rest of the country. There has been considerable gathering of data, fund-

ing of projects, and setting of policies, but done by “those whose business it is.” Frequently they are elected officials carrying out their responsibilities, but the public has had little understanding or awareness of what has been going on around them.

Land use planning has been perceived as a threat by rural people since the 1930’s. One older farmer observed, “Times changed then, food was needed to feed the world and planning was put on the shelf. Times will change again.” Will times change again? Food is again becoming scarce, and not only food, but energy and timber as well. Have people a different understanding about land’s capabilities today? Priorities for land use are needed to provide a kind of selection process that we do not have at the present time.

But citizens seldom actually participate in setting policy. Few citizens ever receive training in what that means or how to carry out that responsibility.

One of Minnesota’s water resource planners has advised that citizens could challenge even the Corps of Engineers plans. They could organize themselves and hire their own consultant to speak for them. In northwest Minnesota, where citizens are rather few and far between, that just did not seem very possible. But it happened, in Douglas County. The site selection for spray effluent was not acceptable to adjoining landowners. They organized, hired their consultants, and asked questions. The decision was put off. The funds were lost, but local people learned a great deal about waste water treatment.

About seventeen years ago the League of Women Voters selected a national study item—water resources. They were active in supporting water quality and water resource management. Even though their major concern was water resources, they quickly realized that they were also talking about land use and people. The study was broadened to include environmental issues. Meanwhile, another League study item, human resources, delved into education, welfare, and housing. Again, members were studying land use and people. Now, Leagues throughout the country will be studying land use policies and procedures that emphasize human needs—the need of minorities, the poor, the elderly, and the young for new living patterns as well as the need of the entire population for beneficial living, working, and recreational environments. As League members discuss optimum land use policies that balance all uses, their challenge is to do so with consideration of both people and resources. Their insights have a bearing on today’s discussion.

Why is land use policy important now? It is important because it is not up to the planner, the economist, or the environmentalist; it is up to us, and our friends and relations—the people. Any level of government which expects to change the system of property rights, land ownership, and land management must effectively involve citizens at all stages of the planning process. There must be a continual striving for effective ways and means by which voices of people can be heard and understood.