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Paul Morris

Paul Morris is a principal of McKeever-Morris, a design and planning firm in Portland, Ore., whose practice focuses on projects that support the region's growth-control initiatives.

How did you become interested in growth management issues?

Ten years ago my partner Mike McKeever and I were involved in a regional energy conservation planning project, designed to protect solar access to homes in new residential development. One lesson was that energy issues were not being considered in discussions about community development and growth management. Another was that it was easier and cheaper to develop on the fringe because projects there could escape some of the costs associated with development.

At that time, the Portland region was beginning to have substantive discussions about growth pressures. We obtained a grant from the local electric company to study how you could design neighborhoods, communities and regions in an interrelated fashion that would be more energy conserving, efficient and more livable.

Ultimately, we realized that urban design and regional planning go together. We developed a modeling process that lets us show the relationship between site design and regional growth policy, giving policy makers the ability to understand—in a tangible fashion, using energy, land use, transportation and infrastructure costs—the implications of one development on the region.

What impact has this research had on the work your firm does?

It has defined our practice. We don't take part in a lot of the commercial development, like shopping centers, that perpetuates the impacts and cost of suburban sprawl, that take a short-term view of community benefit and is not willing to reinvent itself to be more urban oriented.

In our residential and mixed-use planning and design services, we work only with progressive developers who want to build lasting communities, not just sprawling subdivisions. We've also oriented our practice around natural resource conservation, management and restoration.

This has kept us from being considered by the developers who don't produce these kind of projects or care about these issues. Any developer has a product they sell, one that is very carefully crafted. We try to show them the potential savings and added value this approach can bring to their projects, but for them to change would mean reinventing their business.

In hiring staff, from administrative support to senior managers, we don't just look for people who are experts in their field; we look for people who share our philosophy about community and growth. That provides stability for our company and confidence for our clients.

Do you work proactively, as well?

We've continued our research. There is a raging debate about expanding Portland's regional growth boundary to accommodate new development. We analyzed data from our regional government (Metro) and found that half of the development in 1996 occurred on land that Metro already considered developed—which meant that a lot of land within our growth boundary was not built to its full potential. People who wanted to maintain the identity of their local city cores began to see that there was a lot more potential than they had realized.

Sometimes we create projects. For example, in Oregon, most school districts haven't done long-range facility plans,



and cities or no-growth advocates have used inadequate school capacity as a no-growth mechanism. We felt that school districts and local communities should work together to have their plans integrated.

So, about five years ago, we teamed up with the planning director in Beaverton, where this issue was at a high pitch. She went to the state, which funded research we did about how to do integrate city, school and county planning. That led to the passage of legislation requiring that integrated planning be done statewide. Now school districts and communities are working together to establish when and where they're going to need schools and how to fund them. Using school moratoriums to stop development is not an option anymore.

What is your approach to participation?

To find ways to involve broadest range of people throughout the planning and design processes. Not everyone wants or is going to participate in same way or at same time. Some might be on a steering committee. Others might attend a focus group. Still others might respond to polls or come to open houses. Others may simply follow media reports.

Ultimately, the question is how much decision-making authority is given to participants. The biggest problem is setting out, up front, what the limits are; many community leaders do not define who will make decisions or how they will be made. People aren't scared of being told what the limits of their participation are; they're more frustrated by a lack of clarity—when it gets to the end and they don't have as much of a role as they thought.

In any process, it is imperative to communicate early and often what the roles and responsibilities are in a process, and who has final decision making authority. Then, always allow free and full access to the process.

How do you balance your vision versus the goals of the community?

The issue is not us instilling our beliefs in people, but us providing the best technical research information, full information disclosure and an understanding of the implications through common-sense communication techniques. This way, people can make their own best decision. Our experience has consistently illustrated that, given all the information in a clear decision making process, clients (whether public or private) make the best decisions.

It's also important to make small decisions incrementally, starting with the general and moving to the specific, not to expect that the whole decision can be made up front. It's a risk; you may end up with a community that says it wants one-acre lots everywhere. But ultimately, most people realize they aren't willing to pay the price for that, in terms of the impacts on their quality of life, loss of open space and agriculture, and the cost of infrastructure.

Infill housing development in Portland, Ore., is important to the region's ability to live within its urban growth boundary.

Photo: McKeever-Morris