

Land-use planning caters to government at expense of innovation, personal choice

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The Maui Island General Plan is a document that will decide how land is used, where people live, shop, work, play, farm, and so on. On the surface, a general plan for land use sounds like a good idea.

In days gone by, before zoning, communities grew organically in response to the market

place. Shops wanted to be by other shops or along transportation corridors, families wanted to live near other families and farms by water and fertile land, etc.

As society evolved, people's preferences changed and land use adjusted to meet an ever-changing world. The towns that we idealize - Paia, Makawao, Lahaina and Hana - all developed their charm before there were government planners and zoning. Towns and neighborhoods that were built after zoning and government planning constraints do not seem to have as strong of a sense of place.

The General Plan that is being produced is formula based and data driven. Statistics and modeling from the past are used to determine how much land should be designated for urban growth. The primary focus of government planning is to accommodate government services without much focus on the human element and little room for individual innovation and personal choice.

In older times, people would choose whether they wanted to live close to a town near government services or in the outlying areas without fire, police or schools nearby. The General Plan is now going to severely restrict where people live in order to accommodate government services.

The irony is that many of the services provided by government are in short supply or substandard, i.e., roads, schools, water, sewer lines, etc. The government's failure to produce these services has now led to the absurd conclusion that we will reward government's failure with the additional task of now telling us where we should live because we are incapable of figuring it out for ourselves.

As Milton Friedman once quipped: "If government was in charge of the Sahara Desert, there would be a shortage of sand."

We all believe strongly in our personal order of values, and that in a rational discussion with others, we could convince our fellow citizens of our position. The hope of the government planners is that this General Plan will secure the objectives that they personally care most about. They believe they can have their way and their aims fully achieved through the General Plan. But, of course, the adoption of the General Plan which they clamor for can only bring out the concealed conflict between their aims.

The very men who are most anxious to plan society are the most intolerant of the planning of others. It is the resentment of the frustrated specialist that gives demand for planning its impetus. There could hardly be a more unbearable and irrational world than one in which the most eminent specialist in each field is allowed to proceed unchecked in the realization of their ideals.

The political economist Frederick A. Hayek, who won a Nobel prize, wrote: "Intellectuals are attracted to central planning because it involves the rational application of the intellect to the organization of society while its utopianism captures their imagination and satisfies their desire to make the world submit to their design."

The government has taken it upon itself to decide where we should live with only a very limited knowledge of all the facts. The basic purpose for government zoning is for the health and safety of citizens, i.e., no factory spewing toxic fumes or loud noises near homes. If a project has no health, safety, environmental or cultural issues and pays its fair share of impact fees for sewerage, roads, schools, parks, water, etc., then it should be free to build a vibrant community for our residents

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Good planning requires flexibility and community input. Simply applying personal objectives and formulas that include the rate of population growth, the distance people should drive to work, how many people will live in a household, and what size the lot or unit should be does not necessarily result in charming towns and desirable places to live.

What people want in changing economic times are innovations that are not formula based. Flexibility and creativity must be allowed in any planning process, especially one that is intended to be in place over the next 10 to 20 years.

What makes sense today could be the exact wrong plan for tomorrow. I am optimistic that members of the General Plan Advisory Committee can temper the General Plan document to allow for the creativity and innovation which will be needed to satisfy the present and future demands of our residents.

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