

Inside Report for April 12, 2012

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Here is the introduction to a story written in this newspaper in 1995: “Work has yet to start on a long-awaited comprehensive plan for Lafayette Parish’s future development and growth, but officials say an effort is under way to start the planning process.”

And here’s an excerpt from a story earlier this month: “City-parish government is in the early stages of an 18-month effort to draft a ‘comprehensive plan’”

Yes, 17 years after the comprehensive plan was characterized as “long-awaited,” folks are still waiting for it.

Comprehensive plans can address issues as specific as what species of trees should be planted in a store’s parking lot to where to build new roads, parks and sidewalks and how best to spur economic development and manage growth in the rural areas of the parish.

Most people would likely agree that planning for the future is a good thing, but the work comes in sticking to the plan.

A written plan can say all new roads should have sidewalks, space should be preserved for parks or that pipe yards should not be built next to residential subdivisions, but policies and regulations are needed to ensure the plan is followed.

The obvious need for some form of big-picture planning is highlighted in the ongoing debate about how to manage growth in the rural areas of the parish, where there are is no zoning and few restrictions on what can be built.

An oft-repeated complaint by some city-parish officials is that rural residents are strong advocates of private property rights until someone proposes to build a large neighborhood or dirt pit near their quiet country home.

The council’s approach so far has been to deal with each controversial rural development case-by-case rather than passing regulations that clearly define for developers what is acceptable and what is not.

The results have been mixed — and potentially costly in one recent episode involving a garbage transfer facility planned just outside the city limits in north Lafayette.

Waste Facilities of Lafayette had obtained all the proper permits and had met all the existing requirements for the transfer station when the council, acting at the behest of residents across the street, voted to revoke the permit after work had already begun.

Waste Facilities filed a federal lawsuit against city-parish government last month, and the city-parish attorney has already warned that city-parish government could be liable for “millions of dollars” in damages.

When revoking the permit, the council also voted unanimously to ban all new garbage transfer stations in the parish.

Had there been good planning, that ban — or at least tougher regulations on garbage transfer stations — could have been in place before city-parish government found itself embroiled in multimillion-dollar litigation.

City-parish officials now say they are serious about planning and have made a substantial financial commitment in awarding a \$1.2 million contract to the Pennsylvania planning firm Wallace, Roberts & Todd to lead the effort.

Several forums are planned throughout the year to hear from residents on their wants and desires.

The rubber will meet the road when the council has to decide how to move the plan from paper to reality.

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