

INTRODUCTION

In February of 1993, the City of Noblesville, assisted by Indiana University's Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, began "Benchmarking" as a means to update the city's comprehensive plan. The purpose of the initial stages of Benchmarking was to give all of Noblesville's citizens a role in the formation of the city's public policy by asking them to create clear statements of the goals of the community and to design a means of assessing the community's movement toward those goals. The premise of Benchmarking is that a community that pursues quality of life standards that have resulted from consensus will have the best chance of reaching an attractive future.

To determine the collective vision of its residents, a 61-member Benchmarking Committee was selected to begin the process. For two years, Committee members attended meetings, study sessions and a series of presentations examining applicable state, national and international trends. City staff made numerous presentations to local community groups and surveyed over 3000 Noblesville citizens in order to determine a vision statement for the community. Overarching goals, more specific subgoals, and finally measurable benchmarks were determined through discussion and consensus and, in September 1994, the Final Benchmarking Report was published. The report organized the community's goals into three areas - Land, People, and Economy - and collected information and data for each of the benchmarks.

In early 1996, a five-member Steering Committee was appointed by the Mayor and by the City Council to begin the next stage of the process, the first review of the community's progress toward its stated goals. The Steering Committee formed a 26-member Stewardship Commission. These volunteers were divided into teams, organized by the three main goal areas - Land, People, and Economy. Each team was responsible for collecting and reviewing the data identified as measurable in the 195 benchmarks of the original Benchmarking Report. This first phase of the Benchmarking process culminated with a meeting of the entire Stewardship Commission in February 1997. At this meeting, data collected by each of the teams were shared with the rest of the Stewardship Commission to create an assessment of the community's progress towards the first interim benchmark goals. The following section is a part of the first of a series of "report cards" on the direction of the community. Further periodic reports are planned at 5-year intervals beginning in 2000.

THE LAND SECTION

The right of a community to influence the development of its property is the fundamental authority for city planning. For several years, growth in housing and the expansion of business and industry have been headlines in Noblesville. The management of that growth has become the most important community issue and was one of the most significant factors that initiated the benchmarking process. Our community seeks a balance between public interests and private rights, between new development and preservation, and between construction and the natural environment.

The Benchmarking Report of 1994 identified three themes that grew from the long discussions of issues. First, our community supports a diversity in housing types and styles, businesses, old and new structures, and natural settings. Noblesville's citizen panels see variety in these areas as a strength of the city. Second, we believe that the city and its government should take an active role in influencing the pattern and quality of growth in Noblesville, and yet we recognize that this requires maintaining a difficult balance between public and private interests. Third, benchmarking discussions clearly indicated a sensitivity to the importance of the natural environment and to the multi-use potential of the undeveloped landscape.

The Land Benchmarks set goals and priorities for the use and management of public and private areas within and around the community. The second and third stages of the benchmarking process were specifically directed toward the creation of a design for the use of land in and around Noblesville. This led to the most significant document to emerge from the process - the Comprehensive Master Plan, passed by the City Council in November of 1995.

This plan reflects the priorities set by the original committee of residents. The first priority is blunt and direct. The City of Noblesville must control the pattern of growth in our community. Change will happen, and the only question remaining is whether it occurs randomly and on its own terms, or controlled and under the direction of the city. The second priority is virtually a benchmark itself: Net assessed valuation should grow at a rate faster than

that of the cost of providing services. This relationship resolves itself over long terms that are sometimes lost in debates over infrastructure costs. The third priority considers the nature of commercial and industrial growth. Noblesville should pursue industrial and commercial growth only if it supports the value, character, and place tests that benchmarking describes.

Each of these priorities is a request for action, and each, as well, is an issue of balancing interests within our community. One of the purposes of this report is to determine whether action taken in our community pursues that balance. The stewardship project has gathered information for all benchmark areas established in the 1994 report and has commented on the direction of civic and private action in Noblesville.

CONTROLLING THE PATTERN OF GROWTH

The overarching goal in the land section of the Benchmarking Report is to retain and enhance our distinctive small-town atmosphere. The problem of supporting growth and securing the character of the community is our greatest community challenge. Noblesville's response has been to look into the future through long-range land planning and create a strategy for growth and expansion in time to prevent outside forces from imposing patterns on the community through random development. The thesis maintains that if we do not take steps to set restrictions, either they will never be set or they will be set by others whose concerns differ from those of our community.

The Comprehensive Master Plan has created preferences for the location of various types of construction and development in the City of Noblesville and in Noblesville Township. One strategy, to reduce the cost and increase the effectiveness of new infrastructure, targets the wandering growth patterns of city boundaries. Ongoing annexation and development of lands contiguous to present city limits will round the edges of the present city outline and make services easier to route, build, and maintain. Since 1994, over 2200 residential and 400 non-residential acres have been annexed. Additionally, a 670 acre annexation, incorporating the proposed site of a "village center," will be finalized in July 1997. These annexations have made significant progress towards "filling-in" the corporate city's irregular boundaries.

The abovementioned village center is another strategy which has received considerable professional acclaim. This concept designates a general area in each of the four quadrants of Noblesville Township for mixed-use development. The village center concept is intended to meet the daily needs of the surrounding residential neighborhoods by providing some facilities for social and community services and by including opportunities for small business. These "centers," which are intended to contain multi- and single-family housing, retail uses, community uses and parks, resemble a sort of mini-downtown. The object is to avoid the typical trend to develop commercial strips along frontages of primary thoroughfares and at intersections with little forethought given to coordinated traffic issues. By conveniently grouping commercial and service uses in close proximity to areas of residential neighborhoods, this type of haphazard commercial strip development and undesirable spot zonings are discouraged.

A third strategy intends to provide areas whose access to infrastructure will invite commercial business and industry. The Comprehensive Master Plan proposes that a corporate campus-type development be located in the southeast quadrant of the Noblesville Township. The goal of the campus concept is to attract large corporate users, including company headquarters, research and development facilities, as well as smaller local industrial businesses, or a community college. The suggested location for the corporate campus capitalizes on its proximity to State Road 37 and Interstate 69 and could help increase employment opportunities for area residents.

The pursuit of all three strategies has demonstrated the difficulty of balancing the forces at interest. Yet without a plan and the empowering ordinances that extend from it, no balance could be approached. The Comprehensive Master Plan accomplishes the primary purpose of long-range planning - to quantify the vision of our community. It is clearly the most obvious and indisputable success of the Benchmarking process.

BALANCING ASSESSED VALUATION AND THE COST OF SERVICES

Providing services for a growing community is expensive. Schools, recreation areas, sewage treatment, road improvements, police and fire departments, and other service structures create heavy demands on public funds. The

primary increase in the sources of public money in Noblesville has been in taxes from the growth in single family housing. From 1993 to 1996, a total of 1099 permits were issued for single-family residences, ranging from a low of 248 permits in 1993, to a high of 319 permits in 1995. With little new industry or commercial businesses to offset the burden on services, individual homeowners are left to sustain cost increases in infrastructure and services.

In an effort to offset these costs associated with new development and relieve the increasing burden on the existing Noblesville taxpayers, the City Council recently approved the use of impact fees. Since April 1996, an impact fee of \$230 is collected with each new residential building permit issued for property located within the city's corporate limits. These fees are earmarked for the purchase of additional land for Forest Park. Beginning in the fall of 1997, a second impact fee will be collected with each new residential, commercial and industrial permit issued in the first of three areas to be designated for the collection of road impact fees. The entire city of Noblesville, divided into a total of three study areas, will eventually be levied road impact fees in order to subsidize the city's future road construction and provide maintenance for its existing roads.

Plans to extend infrastructure southwest and southeast of Noblesville illustrate the need for regular public debate about the lines between public need and individual rights. One such source of debate is the current project extending city sewer into the southwest corner of Wayne Township, an area currently located outside of Noblesville's jurisdictional boundaries. The intended outcome will be the annexation of the affected property into Noblesville's corporate limits. By establishing a sense of the community and a will to work for its continuance, Benchmarking has supplied the terms of the debate to both sides. Each can refer to Benchmark goals to support its position. These debates over real public concerns find appropriate grounding in community desires through Benchmarking. They are the constant balancing that the community must do to create healthy and responsible growth.

Recent annexations, involving roughly 1300 acres and over 350 households, have challenged the City service providers, especially in terms of fire and police service. The data collected prior to these recent annexations verified that police response times were in line with the 1996 benchmark goals and, in fact, had met the goal projected for the year 2005. Due to inclusion of non-emergency calls, the data gathered for fire response times were not as conclusive. However, fire response times for North Harbor and north of North Harbour did show significant improvement due to the construction of a fourth sub-station. These overall gains in the efficiency of the City public safety service can be attributed to improvements in the Computer Aided Dispatch System. But now, due to recent large annexations, fire and police service providers must increase their capacity to keep pace with the sharp increase in demand on their resources. The fact that over 1300 acres has been annexed since the beginning of 1997 is a prime example of the difficult task the City faces in maintaining balance between rapid growth and the provision of city services.

The city has a responsibility to do more than prepare the way for new business and industry. Noblesville is enjoined by the Benchmarking Report to take an active role in attracting new enterprises while maintaining the vitality of existing ones. This, too, demands balancing. One tactic, supported by Benchmarking, that the City of Noblesville has applied to attract and retain business is tax abatement. Abatement has been offered by the City as an inducement to three separate businesses. Two of these businesses, Warner Bodies and Indiana Cold Storage, utilized the tax benefit to either expand or remodel their facilities. More recently, tax abatement has been offered to encourage private development of an industrial park in the southeast portion of Noblesville Township. Other tactics, including a unified marketing strategy that would pursue specific growth needs of the community, have not yet been developed. Unless the city and its businesses actively seek new business and industry that fit its needs, we will be stuck with whatever industry comes. Worthy of mention is the City Council's financial support of civic organizations that specialize in attracting businesses, such as Hamilton County Alliance and Noblesville Main Street. These organizations serve constituencies whose main focus is either wider or narrower (i.e. entire county, downtown) than a focus on the entire business community of Noblesville.

RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Although not a priority highlighted by the original Benchmarking Report, the condition of our environment is clearly linked to Noblesville's overall quality of life. Much of the environmental health of the community is a product of many federal and state regulations and statutes. Given the complexity of these governmental agencies

and the technical expertise required to interpret much of their data, there is an inherent difficulty in tracking local data for the benchmarks related to environmental issues. Although limited, the benchmark data collected for 1996 appears to indicate that the benchmarks related to the community's environmental health are either in a holding pattern or, in some instances, are experiencing minor gains. Suggestions to improve local accessibility and re-establish local oversight include the creating a new organization or designating an existing agency to be responsible for the interpretation and dissemination of federal and state data pertinent to Noblesville.

Successes related to environmental issues which were noted by data results include the revision of the City's Unified Development Ordinance and Comprehensive Master Plan recommendations as each pertains to floodway and floodplain issues. Both of these land use tools were significantly strengthened in an effort to discourage development of floodway and floodplain areas. Additionally, the City's Parks Department incorporated benchmarking objectives into the update of their Master Plan, and enacted impact fees to purchase more public recreational land.

The data for the benchmark that tracks recycling efforts highlighted that curbside recycling, now in its 8th year, continues to be a successful endeavor in the community. Other benchmark data indicated that the number of septic failures has steadily increased with 1996 figures exceeding the goal set for the year 2000. Finally, although the benchmark goal for 1996 was not met, a 3-year matching federal grant for \$20,000 allowed the City's street department to plant over 500 street trees from 1993 to 1995. Trees were identified by the earlier benchmarking committees as important element in defining small town character.

CONCLUSION

With little question, the greatest challenge to the community of Noblesville is finding the appropriate balance between forces promoting growth and the desire to retain our small-town atmosphere. The Comprehensive Master Land Use Plan has provided an outline for growth that respects the character of the community and has created strategies to that end. City government must continue to take an active role in supporting this document and assuring that all voices be represented in the debates that necessarily result when its strategies are pursued.

The most controversial tactic to relieve current citizens of part of the expense of the cost of growth has been impact fees imposed on new development and construction. Benchmarking has supported such technical devices, including annexation and abatement, whose goal is to balance over time the cost of services created by additions to our community. The extension of infrastructure and associated city services into areas beyond present jurisdictional boundaries has created more concerns. Even the apprehension that individual's rights are secondary to those assumed by the city rattles fundamental notions of democracy. The Benchmarking process discovered that many of these conflicts are not only expected in a dynamic community, but also necessary for responsible change. This report suggests that the burden of educating all citizens in the purpose and method of such devices and of providing opportunities for full discussion must be shouldered by city government and supported by the media.

Most notably lacking from the set of tools Noblesville uses to seek control of growth is a marketing strategy to identify and attract suitable businesses, corporations, and industries. Pieces of a coordinated plan exist in the operation of several organizations in Hamilton County and in Noblesville, but no agency has taken the responsibility to join these plans and planners into a unified effort to select from those economic entities that wish to come to Noblesville and to find and invite those we would prefer to locate here.