

Planners face another fight

The plan commission has struggled to control growth. Now it struggles to survive.

By MICHAEL VAN SICKLER

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TAMPA - Sam Gibbons recalls his dismay as he watched shoddy homes, strip plazas and industrial warehouses get built across Hillsborough County in the boom years after World War II.

So in 1959, the future U.S. representative, then a state senator from Tampa, tried to usher in a different era for growth by establishing a board called the Planning Commission. This board was to be free from political influence so it could plan for sensible growth and ward off ill-conceived projects.

But Gibbons concedes now, almost 50 years later, it didn't work out that way.

To pass the law that created Hillsborough's City-County Planning Commission, Gibbons compromised with lawmakers to deny the board its own taxing power. The county, therefore, holds the board's purse strings.

"It's always been crippled by the fact that it didn't control its own budget," Gibbons said. Now, as state lawmakers consider property tax reform that could force counties to slash costs, Hillsborough's Planning Commission and its \$6-million budget could become a prime focus for cuts.

But what exactly is the Planning Commission? And if it's gone, would it be missed?

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The Planning Commission's relationship with the county is strained, and that could make the planning body a target when the cost-cutting starts.

In March, county commissioners nixed a series of recommendations the Planning Commission made to the county's long-range growth plan that some developers found objectionable. Commissioner Brian Blair likened some recommendations to a "socialist master plan."

In May, commissioners asked their staff to respond to a letter by developer Bing Kearney alleging that the Planning Commission didn't have much to do and hindered growth. The letter implied layoffs were necessary. Kearney, his companies or relatives have contributed about \$30,000 to County Commission candidates since 1999, according to campaign records.

That same month, the county's deputy administrator, Wally Hill, said he and other top officials had been preparing for a future when "there would be no Planning Commission." Its executive director, Bob Hunter, wasn't pleased. Hill's comments were devastating, Hunter said, because it undermined the confidence of the Planning Commission's 60 employees. He demanded an apology he has yet to receive.

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The abstract nature of the Planning Commission can make it hard to judge its impact. It's unlike another regulatory agency under fire from developers, the county's Environmental Protection Commission. The EPC is revered statewide for leading efforts

to ease air and water pollution that have left a tangible legacy of clear-cut environmental victories.

By contrast, the Planning Commission produces land use plans that stretch more than 50 years, which can be tough to measure in the here and now.

Under Hunter's guidance, the Planning Commission developed the urban service area, a zone that covers about two-thirds of the county where growth is supported with roads, utilities and schools. Without that, Hunter said, development would have paved over more rural lands.

"You would have sprawl throughout the entire county," he said.

Now, the area is expected to be fully developed by 2027, Hunter said.

"There should have been stronger guidance," he said. "These projects have been consuming land like a hungry tiger."

The planning board has promoted dense growth since at least the 1970s. But the final decision on projects rests with elected officials, who depend on campaign contributions from developers.

That political reality has always hampered the Planning Commission, according to a 1997 book, *Land Use Planning, Environmental Protection and Growth Management: the Florida Experience*, by former Rutgers University professor Robert Catlin.

"As long as the Planning Commission staff processed zoning changes and subdivision plots to the satisfaction of the development community, they were left alone," Catlin wrote. "On the other hand, when the body attempted to undertake real planning, they were turned back at every occasion."

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It's nothing new for the county to threaten the Planning Commission's budget. Hunter said it happens every few years.

What's new is that the county is making a noise about doing away with it altogether. It doesn't have the power to do that, technically. But it could undermine it with sharp budget cuts.

Clearly, it's something commissioners are considering.

"Let's discuss how we can streamline," said Commissioner Mark Sharpe during a June 6 meeting. "I look at what's going on between the Planning Commission and (the county's Planning and Growth Management Department) and I still ask, are there redundancies there or things we can't do?"

One budget scenario reduces the Planning Commission budget by 17 percent, which Hunter said was huge.

Hunter said the Planning Commission is more efficient than the county's own planning and growth department. He says the county could save at least \$500,000 if his agency assumed some of county's zoning responsibilities. But Hill said the county would be more efficient if it took over the long-range planning done by the Planning Commission. It's a familiar standoff, said John Crislip, who resigned as the executive director of the Planning Commission in 1979 out of frustration with county attempts to cut his budget. "The county would be entirely different if every recommendation the Planning Commission had made had been followed," Crislip said. "But there's so much pressure for sprawl."

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Fast Facts:

What does the Planning Commission do?

- It plans the "orderly growth" of the county and cities of Tampa, Plant City and Temple Terrace. It has a \$6-million budget with a staff of 60 planners and technicians in transportation, urban design, utilities and the environment. Leading it is a board of 10 residents appointed by those four jurisdictions.
 - Since it was created in 1959, its duties have changed. Perhaps its biggest adjustment came in 1980, when Hillsborough County commissioners cut its budget by \$250, 000 and took away a key responsibility: zoning recommendations. Commissioners created a new department that later became known as Planning and Growth Management. The county administrator, and by extension county commissioners, supervise this department.
 - Ever since 1980, this planning and growth department, not the Planning Commission, has made recommendations on rezonings.
 - One of the commissioners who voted for it, Jerry Bowmer, was later found guilty of taking bribes, which included a rezoning case.
 - The department he helped create remains. It still reviews rezonings and makes recommendations to commissioners based on how the project complies with adjacent properties. Meanwhile, the Planning Commission still reviews zonings, but can only make recommendations based on how the project complies with the county's long-range plan.
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