

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

March 2011

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A History of the Ahwahnee Principles:

LGC members and colleagues gathered at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite on March 17-20 to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the *Ahwahnee Principles*. It was a time to look back at what we've accomplished in the past and explore how to create a better future.

The event began with a review of the circumstances that inspired the 1991 development of the *Ahwahnee Principles*. California's population was growing rapidly. To accommodate this growth, communities were consuming more land per capita than ever before as development spread rapidly to Greenfield sites. Throughout the State, new office buildings, malls, big box development and housing were being stamped out from the same patterns, and sited on large lots in isolated pods of homogeneous uses. Historic downtowns and many older neighborhoods were in decline.

Land use was experiencing its own obesity crisis — we were devouring too much of it. This led to a variety of illnesses, including severe traffic congestion, worsening air and water quality, increased infrastructure and service costs, loss of open space, and an overall decline in the quality of life.

During the 1980s, many local leaders and their residents realized that accommodating new growth was reducing the quality of their towns and cities. Thus, a slow-growth, no-growth movement began — if growth was ruining our communities, why not stop it?

By 1990, the no-growth movement had about run its course. Most efforts to stop growth had not been successful. While Santa Cruz County managed to establish an urban growth boundary, the opposition to this elsewhere was fierce. Further, elected officials who wished to address both the need for jobs and for preserving the environment were struggling to address these competing issues. Thus, that year, the LGC tackled land use.

We first sought help from Mary Nichols, who, at that point, was a transportation expert for the Environmental Defense Fund. Mary sent us to Anne Geraghty, a CA Air Resources Board staff member with a creative mind and some grant money. We agreed to develop an alternative to urban sprawl. Fortunately, there were two newly completed development projects to point to as models: Seaside, a second home community located in Florida and Village Homes in Davis, CA.

Next we found Peter Katz, a real estate specialist who was writing a book (*The New Urbanism*), and a handful of young architects exploring new directions in urban planning. Some of those featured in the book were gathering for a design competition in the City of West Sacramento. Thus, Judy and

Michael Corbett invited Andres Duany, Elizabeth Platter-Zyberk, Peter Calthorpe, Stefanos and Liz Polyzoides, and Katz to their home for a meeting to define a better way for communities to grow. Attorney Steve Weissman distilled their ideas into a recipe — expressed in language appropriate for a general plan — and the *Ahwahnee Principles* were born!

In November of 1991, the LGC brought the completed set of *Ahwahnee Principles*, their architects, and 100 local elected leaders to Yosemite's Ahwahnee Hotel for an unforgettable "A-HA!" moment. With a practical, common-sense, win/win solution in their hands, inspired city councilmembers, mayors and county supervisors went home to completely change the direction of growth and planning in their communities.

Implementation of the Ahwahnee Principles Today:

Since 1991, there are some new and very compelling forces driving the implementation of the *Ahwahnee Principles* — global climate change and peak oil. We now know that it is not just the quality of life in California that is at stake; it is our economic, social, and environmental future.

Recordings of the 1991 conference reveal that some local leaders already had a notion of a better way to grow. Supervisor Art Baggett from Mariposa County felt compact development in his rural town could preserve the beautiful open space that surrounded it. Mayor Roberta Hughan from Gilroy had a vision of neighborhoods where people could walk to a store and kids could walk to school. Sacramento Supervisor Grantland Johnson was working on a general plan update that would make transit available throughout the County, and Santa Cruz County Supervisor Gary Patton promoted the County's urban limit line. Heather Fargo, then a new Sacramento City Councilmember, was working with residents on planning walkable neighborhoods in the Natomas area.

The *Ahwahnee Principles* simply put all these ideas together, providing a list of ingredients for a comprehensive and specific alternative to sprawl development in language appropriate for a general plan.

At this month's Ahwahnee Conference we carried out a rough survey of the elected official participants to judge the progress made in implementing the *Principles* —

GENERAL PLAN LANGUAGE: A majority of elected officials in attendance at the conference have, two decades later, incorporated a vision of compact, mixed-use, walkable communities in their general plans. (Today, AB 32 requires this and the Attorney General may enforce it, at his/her discretion.)

DOWNTOWNS: In 1991, most downtowns were in decline and some were still suffering from the “mall” that was popular in the sixties. Because people vacated the area after work, downtowns didn’t feel safe after dark. What was needed was the adoption of mixed-use ordinances and specific plans that would allow downtowns to become places where people could live, work and play.

Downtown redevelopment is probably one of the greatest areas of success achieved during the last 20 years. In addition to zoning changes, revitalization efforts have been driven by changing demographics and by the strong desire to regain a sense of place. Almost every one of this year's conference attendees said they now have a downtown, mixed-use ordinance that provides for housing and other amenities.

WALKABLE, TRANSIT-ORIENTED NEIGHBORHOODS: At the 1991 conference, the only developer present complained about his lack of ability to create walkable, mixed-use communities. He felt his life would be complete if only he could build a neighborhood around a transit stop with all the needed amenities, allowing people to live without having to depend upon a car. Alas, current zoning laws prohibited him from doing so.

We asked this year's participants, “How many of you have updated your zoning codes to allow for mixed-use, compact, and walkable development connected to transit — not just in your downtown but also in newly growing or revitalizing neighborhoods?” Almost half responded in the affirmative.

INVOLVING CITIZENS TO CREATE A SENSE OF PLACE: The 1991 conference was the first time we heard the term, “design charrette.” Two young Florida architects, Dover and Kohl, brought it to us. Twenty years later, just about everyone in the audience at the Ahwahnee had been involved in a design charrette.

FORM-BASED CODES / INVOLVEMENT OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: Two important implementation ideas have been developed since the first Ahwahnee Conference. One is the form-based code, now reportedly in use by about a third of this year's Ahwahnee participants, and the other is the engagement of public health officials in the land use process — about a quarter reported having taken this step.

REGIONAL PLANNING: In 1991, Contra Costa County Supervisor Sunne McPeak talked about the need to bring together all sectors of the community to create a countywide or regional vision for the future. Fifteen years later, as Secretary of the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, she made it happen by directing transportation funds to regional blueprint planning. This work led to SB 375, a measure requiring regions to develop sustainable

communities strategies.

GUIDANCE FROM THE STATE: Back in 1991, there was a unanimous call from local elected officials for State guidance in land use planning. Today AB 32 and SB 375 provide the planning framework. The federal government has gone even further. Shelley Poticha, the Director of HUD’s Office of Sustainable Communities told us that the President of the United States is firmly in support of land use principles like the *Ahwahnee Principles* and is offering financial support to communities throughout the U.S. for this type of development.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: Forward-thinking local elected officials in California have put many models on the ground that follow the tenets of the *Ahwahnee Principles*. Research has proven that if you build it, residents will come — they will drive less and walk more. Because many people prefer to live in walkable places, the market is there and the economics are highly favorable.

Conference speakers agreed — for the long-term economic and environmental health of our communities, the *Ahwahnee Principles* now need to become the “default model” for all new growth.

The conference also explored new directions for the years ahead and Richmond Councilmember Tom Butt provided his summary of this portion of the program:

“The presentations of Peter Katz, Michael Freedman and Santa Cruz Mayor Ryan Coonerty painted a picture of a whole new world of work that is nothing like we have ever seen before. Mayor Coonerty noted that it is a lot easier to bring 200 self-employed entrepreneurs to your city than to move a company there with 200 employees, and the results are much more effective. Freedman talked about the end of a 50-year experiment with cities as we know them, to the city as the driver of innovation and the rise of the creative class. Noel Perry, Director of Next10 provided a statistical look at how green jobs are leading California out of the recession.”

— More about this view of the future in next month’s issue of *Livable Places Update!*



The winter beauty of Yosemite was crowned when the Valley became snowbound, all access closed, just after the Ahwahnee Conference. Fortunately, all arrived home safely!