GUEST EDITORIAL

by Daniel Paquette

Beyond the Two-Acre Backyard: Planning for Affordable Housing

For many small to medium-size builders, the issues surrounding land use and development seem quite distant.

Many builders simply build new homes for clients who already own their lot, or they remodel existing homes. Others buy existing platted lots, or buy directly from a developer whose job is to professionally acquire, seek approvals for, and create subdivisions of house lots for the retail market. Builders typically become concerned only when high prices or scarcity of land creates a problem.

But behind the "pipeline" of buildable lot production is a network of complex and critical issues. These issues will have a dramatic impact on all builders and the products they will be able to offer in the future.

Last year, as I sat in the audience of a land planning seminar in Phoenix, Arizona, the moderator, a land planner from Denver, pointed his finger at us and ominously warned, "You builders and developers are responsible for your own problems. You dropped the ball... and now you are chasing after the few strands of control left in the issue of land use."

We have dropped the ball! As I sit at countless planning and zoning board meetings, attend land use seminars, and participate in statewide planning efforts, I realize that the effects of the environmental community, the archaic New England land planning concepts, and the lack of education within the building industry and among consumers have combined to create a crisis.

What is the crisis? It stems from the fact that we no longer live up to the 40-year-old American housing policy of "a decent home and suitable living environment for *every* American family."

The crisis in New England began when the wise land planning practices in the 60s and early 70s gave way to a vision based on single-family houses on large rural lots. This approach seemed comfortable, and as there was plenty of open ground and farmland, this gross misuse of land proliferated. The day of the 40- and 80-thousand-square-foot house lots become the norm. If sewer and water were available or an infrastructure in place, perhaps lot sizes could be less, but not necessarily. Accompanying this concept of large-lot zoning came an ever growing environmental awareness. Obviously no builder objects to legitimate and clearly stated controls on land use that protect the environment. So the environmental community went unchecked.

Suddenly, during the unprecedented building boom from 1984 to 1987, all of these steeping dogs raised their heads. Cities and towns, alarmed by seemingly unstoppable growth, fell back to what they thought was good planning and increased lot sizes even more, to protect open space, Rut this is pure folly. The environmental community grew more powerful and extended their controls and approval authority far beyond anything builders could have expected. Their goal was to stop growth with strong environmental regulation and legislation.

The result: long delays in approvals, large lots, much higher log costs, and ultimately, the reality that many Americans are being locked out of the American Dream. For the first time since the depression, the rare of home ownership is steadily declining.

What can a builder do? First of all, he should be aware of the issues and educate himself. I suggest reading *Creative Land Development: Bridge to the Future,* by Robert A. Lemire. Mr. Lemire, whose planning course I attended last year, speaks quite succinctly: "We need to save what needs to be saved—build what needs to be built—and deal fairly with the dollar interest of the land owner and use planning initiatives, not simply regulatory reaction."

We need to take a new look at land planning, and clearly define comprehensive plans for the destiny of each of our towns and cities. We need to implement new planning techniques such as cluster, zero lot line, higher densities, and planned-unit development (PUD). And, we need to give developers and builders unit bonuses when they create an affordable product. These planning techniques respect the environment and can leave open space that is usable, not simply someone's two-acre backyard.

I use this example frequently in the planning debates at the Governor's land-use committee in Rhode Island, upon which I currently sit. This committee is made up of environmentalists, planners, legislators, zoners, builders, and developers: Imagine an overlay map of your state, or your particular city of town. On the first overlay we place all of the land boundaries and physical features. On the second layer, all of the lakes, streams, wetlands, and water sources that need protection as well as their buffers. On the third, all the coastal features and their buffers that cannot be disturbed. On the fourth all of the ground water aquifers and recharge areas. On the fifth all the existing lots, and sixth (and most important) the zoning overlay showing these large lot subdivisions that exist today.

What comes from this exercise is a frightening awareness: Land is a fragile commodity. And with the growing demand and dwindling inventories, there is certain to be little remaining. The days of the housing "haves" and "have-nots" are here.

Builders must become educated and involved! When your community is developing a comprehensive plan or rewriting its zoning, consider participating, Join your local trade organization and support its legislative action. Do not sit by and think that the development community is doing it all. Everyone in the shelter industry must become involved—builders, developers, realtors—everyone.

As Robert Whittlesey of the Boston Housing Partnership stated "When we shut young families out of the housing market, not only do their dreams of ownership and the security it represents shatter. Community vitality suffers. Employers lose workers. The economy can be hurt. Businesses may move out if we cannot provide affordable housing."

If you are interested in the future of the housing marker, arm yourselves with knowledge and get involved. The time for action is now. ■

Daniel Paquette is principal in Sukonnet Group, Portsmouth, R. I. , which designs, builds, and develops several successful projects per year. He was recently appointed to Rhode Island's Commission to Study the Entire Area of Land Use, Preservation, Development, and Regulation.

Letters

Favorite Wall System

To the Editor:

As an insulation contractor in Southern Vermont specializing in new construction, Alex Wilson's article on Wall Systems *(NEB 4/88)* was of great interest.

My primary client, Progressive Design of Putney, Vt., and I have been using a system very similar to Chuck Silver's for the past two years in twelve homes of varying designs. We are using 2x4 walls (16 inches on-center) with 3 5/8 inch fiberglass in between the studding, covering the studs with 1/2 inch Koppers, taping all joints with either foil or Tyvek tape, and strapping horizontally with 2x4's. Our band joists are done with 2-inch Koppers, cut to fit in between the joists, sealed with clear silicone, and taped on all four sides for further protection. all wiring and plumbing is run as in Silver's scheme.

To us, the main benefit of this type of system is in the area of vapor protection—no penetrations through the vapor barrier into-the wall cavity. This is something you do not get with any system in which Sheetrock is applied directly over the Koppers/foam layer or poly, making holes in your vapor barrier/retarder for electrical boxes necessary (which then have to be re-sealed). Nor do we trust the integrity of our vapor barrier to the vagaries of the sheetrocker's router.

In addition, with no wiring in the cavity, the fiberglass goes in properly, fits snugly, and is nowhere compressed, to say nothing of the time saved by not having to work around wires, cutting, etc. The 3 5/8 - inch fiberglass is factory cut at 8-foot lengths, which cuts down on cutting labor, and our final wall heights run to a perfect 8 feet, making for no ripping of the Koppers sheets. Taping is done with great care and all window/door frames are taped to the Koppers after spray-foam is applied in the shim spaces.

As Silver mentions, electricians do like the system (and yes... after the first one) and the rough wiring cost is usually reduced. We find that our final costs to the general contractor to be within pennies of the old standard 6-inch fiberglass and 6-mil. poly routine—heavier on the material side, but less on the labor. We also feel that we end up with a far superior product and only wish that more builders in our area would start thinking about using similar systems. Hopefully your article(s) will spur some thought on the matter.

David Parker
D.Y. Parker, Inc.
Westminster West, Vt.

Where do the Chemicals Go?

To the Editor:

In your article, "Cleaning Exterior Masonry," (2/88), Walter Jowers fails to mention what happens with the chemical cleaners that are rinsed from the building. Is it to be assumed that they simply go into the ground to eventually find their way into our drinking water? Or is there a method for cleaning the chemicals up as they are washed off?

Paul Gallant
Gallant and Young
Nottingham, N.H.

Letters

Walter Jowers responds:

I have seen specifications for whole-building paint-stripping jobs (in which methylene chloride was used) that called for a capture system for the rinse runoff. The capture systems described were essentially polyethylene-and-duct-tape rigs at the bottom of the building. The system would catch the runoff and direct it to a lined trench or gutter, where it would be gathered up, put into labeled containers, and disposed of properly. Different communities have different laws and practices regarding hazardous waste—and even what constitutes hazardous waste—so, the specs would conform to the applicable laws.

In some cases—probably even most cases—the rinse water from a cleaning job goes right down the nearest sewer. Not exactly bottled spring water, but not liquid plutonium either. What we're talking about here are pretty straightforward detergents, or acid or alkaline solutions. By the time they're water-blasted off a building, they're pretty dilute. Just about any preservation contractor will tell you that a building's once-every-fifty years bath doesn't hurt masonry nearly as much as a few years of acid rain. I imagine the same holds true for living things.

And as the Restoration Primer columnist, I should point out that we restore old buildings not just to save part of the past, but to conserve materials and energy. Compared to building new, a typical restoration job consumes relatively little petroleum, iron, copper, gypsum, wood—everything but labor. I'm glad that there are NEB readers who are thoughtful enough to worry about what happens to the rinse water from a cleaning job, but I doubt that the runoff is anywhere near as damaging to the environment as the automobiles that pass by the building every day.

Survived the Purge

To the Editor:

You may be happy to learn that your magazine has become the only survivor of my "Subscription Renewal Purge." As the owner of a small new home/renovation business, I have found the majority of publications I receive to be boring or outright ridiculous. Articles about merchandizing your 600 townhouses, self-appreciative articles by architects and designers, and articles by amateurs who think they *discovered* basic building practices just don't cut it.

NEB, on the other hand, is full of information useful to the "hands-on" builder. Your articles on products and techniques are as welcome as those on safety and legal situations. Yours is one subscription renewal I won't toss. Keep up the good work.

Jay Bethel
Bethel Building
Cape May, N.J.

Keep 'em coming... We welcome letters, but they must be signed and include the writer's address. *New England Builder* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and clarity. Mail letters to *NEB,* P.O. Box 5059, Burlington, VT 05402.