

The Planning Commissioner and the **California Dream**

The Book at a Glance

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Preface

Why do we see our communities the way we do? What comes to mind when we hear “Main Street,” “The wide open spaces,” “The boy next door,” “The Beach”? The pictures we see in our heads when we hear these words affect us powerfully in the ways we value and interact with the places where we live, work, and play.

Our vision of America has been shaped, in large part, by motion pictures, especially those that have been filmed in California. The values based on this vision have in turn shaped environmental and planning regulations. The cowboy movies filmed in the Alabama Hills west of Lone Pine conveyed the ideas of unconfined freedom and natural beauty; there are still no subdivisions in the foothills near Mount Whitney. You might say that Randolph Scott movies helped lead to the adoption of the California Environmental Quality Act.

The California beach movies of the 1950s and 1960s portrayed youthful energy and fun in a priceless setting. Californians in 1972 approved the Coastal Act, which imposes strict rules about development in this zone. You might say that Gidget, the teenage heroine of many beach movies, helped save the California Coast, so that we could preserve the locale of our youth.

California was the leader in environmental and planning law in the 1970s. *Unfortunately, despite the unquestionable need for effective state planning, we are no longer in that position today.* The state mandated an important role for planning commissions, as the keepers of the vision for their communities.

Various guides for planning commissioners are published by the American Planning Association, the International City/County Management

Association, and California's Office of Planning and Research. *See the Bibliography for titles and web sites.* These publications provide the basic information about legal and procedural requirements that apply to planning commissioners.

This book differs from these in several important ways.

- ▶ It focuses on the requirements for planning commissions specific to the State of California. Each state has its own requirements for planning: for example, the California Environmental Quality Act.
- ▶ It covers recent trends and requirements affecting planning commissioners: for example, the use of citizen initiatives and referenda on planning matters and the recent state law mandating that most large subdivisions must be guaranteed water before they can be approved. *Sounds like a no-brainer, but the Kuehl bill was a hard-fought battle in Sacramento.*
- ▶ It illustrates the essentials you need to know with occasional, and we hope amusing, anecdotes. You are probably not paid, except perhaps a token fee, so there's no point doing it if you don't enjoy it. *Unless you use your service as a stepping stone to higher office—not uncommon among planning commissioners.*
- ▶ It is realistic about the limitations you have in shaping your community. Regional, national, and international economic trends beyond the reach of local government affect change and development. State planning law gives cities and counties powerful tools to direct and manage growth, but whether it actually occurs is determined more in corporate board rooms than in city hall.

And other strong players can constrain local governments: water agencies, tribal councils, and planning entities established by state government, the California Coastal Commission, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, and Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

- ▶ Most important, this book attempts to convey the special responsibility planning commissioners have in California. California locales are an important part of our nation's culture, identity, and imagery. *For example, 1949 Los Angeles in The Blue Dahlia, 1925 Lompoc in The Bank Dick, 1943 Santa Rosa in Shadow of a Doubt.* Photographs of movie locations help illustrate this point.

So those of us who plan the future have a special responsibility to respect and enhance the unique characteristics of each place. How will people—and movies—50 years from now judge our efforts?

For this reason, a well-known quote from a film is used to illustrate a major point for each chapter. And, thus the subtitle, “Plan It Again, Sam,” a paraphrase from *Casablanca*, 1943. Let's hope we plan it right the first time.