Publication Announcement

MASTER PLANNERS

Fifty Years of Regional Planning in Southeastern Wisconsin: 1960-2010

By Paul G. Hayes

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BACKGROUND

In September 1960, Wisconsin Governor Gaylord A. Nelson issued an executive order creating the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC). Nelson acted upon the unanimous request of the County Boards of Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Walworth, Washington, and Waukesha Counties. The enabling legislation that provided for SEWRPC's creation remains essentially the same today, specifying three major regional planning functions: collection and dissemination of basic planning data; preparation of advisory regional plans that focus on land use and public infrastructure; and coordination of the planning and plan implementation activities of the 153 county and municipal units of government within the Region.

To guide its future by reviewing and learning from its past work, and to commemorate its 50th anniversary, SEWRPC commissioned Paul G. Hayes to write the history. Hayes, an award-winning journalist who covered SEWRPC during its formative first decade and beyond as a reporter for The Milwaukee Journal, was given full access to all SEWRPC documentation as well as to SEWRPC Commissioners and key staff members, past and present. The results of Hayes' work are set forth in a book entitled, “Master Planners: Fifty Years of Regional Planning in Southeastern Wisconsin: 1960-2010.” The book has been published by Marquette University Press and is available directly from SEWRPC as well as from the Marquette University Press.

The book places SEWRPC in the context of the natural and social history of Southeastern Wisconsin from its geological past through first settlement to the end of the first decade of the 21st Century. The book covers SEWRPC's pioneering regional planning innovations; its efforts to protect the Region's natural environment and to contain urban sprawl through land use planning; its transportation plans, including the
freeway controversies of the 1970s and the enduring political stalemate over public transit services; and its early focus on comprehensive watershed planning, as well as related efforts to provide a reliable water supply, to treat wastewater, and to restore the Region's waterways. The book also addresses Wisconsin's 21st Century Smart Growth law and its relationship to SEWRPC's work.

REGIONAL PLANNING INNOVATIONS

Having closely observed SEWRPC in its early years, Paul Hayes is familiar with the planning precedents created by SEWRPC at that time. In the book, Hayes reviews those precedents, noting that the foundation laid during the 1960s continues to underpin SEWRPC planning today. These precedents may be grouped into two categories:

Planning Foundations
Hayes describes how SEWRPC emphasized the need to create a sound database that would provide the foundation for regional plans. Among these efforts were:

- Regional base mapping starting with a survey control framework and attendant aerial photography and topographic and cadastral maps that provided the foundation for today's web-delivered land information systems.
- Regional soil survey and soil use interpretations.
- Regional land use inventory.
- Natural resource base inventory, including wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife habitat areas.
- Stream flows and stages and flood hazard mapping.
- Surface and groundwater quality monitoring.
- Regional travel behavior and pattern data.
- Regional transportation system capacity and utilization data.
Technical Approaches to Planning

Hayes also describes how SEWRPC's early work programs pioneered innovative approaches to preparing regional plans. Among these were:

- Preparation of a regional land use plan to serve as a basis for the development and coordination of all other regional plan elements, such as transportation, sewerage, and water supply. The use of a regional land use plan, as opposed to a trend projection of future land use, was at the time a unique approach in the nation, and still is not fully embraced nationwide. Proposing a departure from current trends in land development, the regional land use plan continues to recommend preservation of the Region's natural resource base and prime farmlands, and a more compact and efficient higher density pattern of land use development.

- The precise identification of the best remaining elements of the Region's natural resource base, so that the resources proposed to be preserved were not just conceptually identified, but could be delineated on maps and aerial photographs and in the field, and indeed preserved.

- The planning for the preservation, improvement, and expansion of mass transit systems at a time when transit was provided in the private sector and was ignored in metropolitan transportation plans.

- The recognition and use of watersheds as a principal planning unit for all things related to water quantity and quality, including flood mitigation planning and stream water quality improvement planning.

- The use of explicitly stated goals and objectives—and standards to measure the achievement of those goals and objectives—to guide the planning process, including the design and evaluation of alternative plans.
Formulation and use of mathematical simulation models and application of systems engineering to transportation, sewerage, flood control, water quality management, and water supply planning.

The explicit and detailed definition and evaluation of alternative plans permitting quantitative consideration of the potential implications of alternative courses of action as the basis of determining a recommended course of action.

The recognition and articulation of the concept of planning for infrastructure as cyclical in nature, beginning with areawide systems planning, followed by facilities planning and preliminary engineering and final engineering and construction, with feedback loops at each stage, resulting in successive plan revision and refinement.

The extensive use of both technical and intergovernmental advisory committees to guide regional planning efforts and help insure that regional plan elements were sound, in the long run public interest, and generally acceptable to State agencies and the Region’s many county and local units of government.

REGIONAL PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the book Paul Hayes reviews the key regional plans prepared by SEWRPC over the 50 year period, takes note of the major plan recommendations made, and comments on the extent to which those recommendations had an impact on the Region. The array of plans includes, among others, the fundamental regional land use plan; regional transportation plans that address highways, transit, and airports; watershed plans that comprehensively address water quality and quantity issues; and water related infrastructure plans that address both water
supply and the treatment of wastewater. What follows is a brief summary of some of Hayes' findings with respect to the effectiveness of the regional plans over the 50 year period.

Environmental Corridors

'SEWRPC's strategy for controlling sprawl was multifaceted and included pioneering recommendations in regional planning. None inspired the public more and none was more successful as a tool to protect the region's best remaining natural resources than the concept of the environmental corridor. The very phrase “environmental corridor” was introduced to Southeastern Wisconsin by the regional plan. It remains popular and useful as a concept among planners and environmentalists today.' Hayes (2010:62)

The initial and all subsequent regional land use plans include a recommendation that steps be taken to preserve and protect the most important elements of the Region's natural resource base. Those elements include the best remaining woodlands, wetlands, and wildlife habitat areas and tend to be located as linear areas in the landscape, or corridors. This particular plan recommendation has been widely implemented both in terms of public land use regulation and land acquisition by public agencies and private land trusts. Shown in the accompanying picture is an environmental corridor along the Milwaukee River in Ozaukee County.
Regional Parks

‘In all, of nine sites identified by SEWRPC to be preserved as important parks, eight were recommended by the commission; all eight were protected and developed as popular regional destinations. Each lies within a primary environmental corridor. Some park sites such as Pike Lake already were under consideration by the state before the regional plan was published, so a fraction of the outcome would have occurred without the plan. But the full result came about because of SEWRPC. Regarding parks, the plan brought enduring benefits to the region.’ Hayes (2010:70)

At the time of SEWRPC’s creation in 1960, there were only three State parks serving Southeastern Wisconsin, two of which were far too small for State park status. To address this deficiency in the State’s most populated region, SEWRPC early on undertook a potential park study working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the county park organizations in the Region. Many hundreds of potential park sites were identified in the field, mapped, and rated for their potential acquisition for park and recreation purposes. In all, the first regional land use plan proposed 20 new State or county park sites, of which 14 have been acquired to date. Shown in the accompanying picture is Harrington Beach State Park along Lake Michigan's shoreline in Ozaukee County.
Flood Hazard Data

'You don’t have to continue building on the floodplain. To avoid doing so, however, you must find the boundaries of the floodlands and map them. The planners did it.' Hayes (2010:44)

SEWRPC has long maintained that simply providing better information will lead to better decision making. Such has been the case over the years as SEWRPC has completed comprehensive watershed studies. A key element of each watershed study is the development through engineering work of reliable flood hazard information and the preparation of good, large scale flood hazard maps as shown on the accompanying map. Such data and mapping are now available for over 850 miles of stream channels in Southeastern Wisconsin.

Protecting Agriculture/Curtailing Urban Sprawl

'There were notable successes regarding parks, floodplains, and environmental
A key recommendation of the original 1966 regional land use plan, and all others since, was to preserve prime farmland and help curtail urban sprawl. This particular plan recommendation, coming up against long-in-place zoning policies and maps that favored urban development, found relatively limited acceptance by local governments over the 50-year period. In reviewing this matter, Hayes notes that an innovative SEWRPC proposal to apply newly acquired soils data as a tool in limiting urban sprawl was relatively short lived, being undermined by the development of on-site sewage disposal technology to overcome natural soil limitations. While Hayes concludes that advisory regional planning with respect to urban sprawl had mixed results in five of the six counties to which that recommendation was directed, he also reports on the major success in sprawl control that occurred throughout Walworth County.

Freeways

‘...just days before the regional plan was explained in detail in The Milwaukee Journal’s blockbuster 10-page section, storm clouds of anti-freeway protest were not merely on the horizon, they were directly overhead and ready to burst.’ Hayes (2010:93)

SEWRPC’s original 1966 freeway recommendations built upon initial freeway decisions made by others, including the State Highway Commission of Wisconsin and the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission. In reviewing transportation planning, Hayes traces the impacts that the automobile has had on all aspects of American life, documents the original 1990 recommended freeway system plan, and reviews the long period of freeway turmoil that occurred in the
highways. Examples of recommended new facilities, and facilities with major capacity expansion, which have been implemented include STH 165, STH 50, and STH 31 in Kenosha County; the Lake Parkway, S. 43rd Street, Good Hope Road, and Rawson Avenue in Milwaukee County; STH 167 in Ozaukee County; STH 31, STH 36, and the Burlington bypass in Racine County; STH 50, the Whitewater USH 12 bypass; and the Lake Geneva STH 120 bypass in Walworth County; STH 60, STH 167, and Pilgrim Road in Washington County; and Moorland Road, the Waukesha bypass, STH 164, STH 59, and the direct routing of Pilgrim Parkway in Waukesha County.

SEWRPC also put forth many recommendations over the years to change the jurisdictional responsibilities for arterial highways, primarily transferring responsibility from local to county government, and from county government to State government, all made necessary to reflect significant changes in land
use and regional travel habits and patterns. Examples of these proposals which have been implemented include the routing of STH 164 in Racine, Waukesha, and Washington Counties, the routing of STH 120 in Walworth County, and the routing of STH 165 in Kenosha County.

**Transit**

"Each edition of the regional transportation plan included an original component for improving mass transit service. Each of the five generations of the plan explained in detail what the Region could and should do to support transit system development. Each transit plan was a product of the process that SEWRPC had pioneered.

...However, even after 40 years of transit planning some critics contended that SEWRPC was ignoring mass transit. This baffling assertion could be explained only in one of three ways: The critics had not read the plans that they were criticizing. The critics were so ideologically opposed to SEWRPC that they were deliberately distorting the facts or were themselves blind to the facts. Or the critics may have misconstrued the advisory nature of SEWRPC in that it could only recommend plans, not carry them out. Thus, for political or economic reasons recommended highways might be built while transit improvements either were ignored by elected officials or became mired in a political standoff, and SEWRPC, the nonpolitical planner of both highways and transit, took the blame.' Hayes (2010:171)

Not only did SEWRPC innovate nationally with its approach to transit planning in the 1960s, SEWRPC provided significant assistance to county and municipal governments in the 1970’s, helping guide them toward the acquisition of failing privately
operated transit systems in the Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, and Waukesha areas. Recommendations were then provided to improve, and in some cases, reestablish transit services. Over the years SEWRPC has reexamined transit needs and continued to recommend public investment in transit to serve not only those individuals in the Region who do not or cannot drive, but also to capture some measure of patrons who would choose transit for selected trip making if a robust transit system was available. In his review of SEWRPC's transit planning efforts, Hayes traces the original transit recommendations and efforts, including an exclusive busway in the Milwaukee east-west travel corridor that was never built, through recent SEWRPC support of fledgling regional transit authorities, noting that the funding of transit remains a political stalemate at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century.

Water Quality Infrastructure

'A bold proposal for pollution control remained in the [1971 Milwaukee River watershed] plan. It called for huge underground chambers to be excavated in bedrock hundreds of feet below the city to catch the storm-caused sewage overflows and store them until dry weather returned and the sewage could be pumped to sewage treatment plants. This was the beginning of the deep tunnel plan that was carried out successfully and was being expanded some 40 years later.' Hayes (2010:56)

'Building the deep tunnel project was an immense undertaking, one of the largest public works programs in Wisconsin's history. Its planning and construction took years, and the outcome was fully consistent with the regional plan... In February 2010, MMSD reported on the overall record of operating the deep tunnel system. The average annual percentage of wastewater captured and treated over the 16-year history of the tunnels was 98.2 percent of the water that entered
district sewers. In two years in which rainfall was less than average, the system captured and treated 100 percent in 2003 and 99.99 percent in 2006. The tunnels worked as planned.' Hayes (2010:205)

Over the 50 year period, SEWRPC undertook numerous studies that addressed water quality and water pollution problems, including eight comprehensive watershed plans, a regional sanitary sewerage system plan, a regional water quality management plan, and a Milwaukee Harbor estuary study. Together these plans put forth a series of recommendations directed at improving stream and lake water quality in the Region. Some of these recommendations proposed infrastructure improvements such as the Milwaukee deep tunnel project to abate separate and combined sewer overflows referenced above and pictured in the accompanying photograph, and the construction of
new, larger, and better wastewater treatment facilities that replaced many small, inefficient, poorly performing treatment plants. Examples include the Walworth County Metropolitan Sewerage District treatment facility, now serving eight communities; the Dela-Hart facility in central Waukesha County, now serving four communities; and the Fox River Water Pollution Control facility in eastern Waukesha County, now serving six communities. In total, the Commission water quality management plans, adopted and implemented by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, resulted in the abandonment of 20 public sewage treatment plants, and of 35 of 59 private sewage treatment plants and the consideration of 10 new consolidated plants. Other recommendations related to the abatement of pollution from such diffuse sources as agricultural land and urban stormwater runoff. Throughout several chapters in the book, Hayes describes and comments on each of these planning efforts, noting that significant improvements in stream and lake water quality have come about over the 50 year period.

**Water Supply**

*Whatever the outcome [of the City of Waukesha's Lake Michigan water diversion application], as a result of both the Council of Great Lakes Governors' Great Lakes Compact and the Southeastern Wisconsin regional water supply plan, contentious and poorly understood issues had been clarified, the protection of the Great Lakes had gained legal interstate and international status, and technically feasible solutions were at hand.*

Hayes (2010:216)

SEWRPC was engaged in the preparation of a regional water supply plan at the time Paul Hayes was writing the history. In that history, Hayes draws attention to the legal, political, and practical significance for water supply planning of the
subcontinental divide that traverses Southeastern Wisconsin, separating the St. Lawrence River/Great Lake drainage basin from the Mississippi River drainage basin. Several years in the making, SEWRPC adopted the regional water supply plan as 2010 drew to a close. That plan provides the last major anticipated element of the comprehensive regional plan that was envisioned nearly 50 years ago. As with all regional plans, the water supply plan recommendations are advisory to the State and local governments involved. The plan provides recommendations for water supply service areas, water supply source, water conservation, stormwater management, rainfall infiltration, and groundwater recharge area protection.

LOOKING AHEAD

As SEWRPC begins its second half-century of work, many challenges remain to be addressed at a time when fiscal resources are shrinking. As 2011 begins, SEWRPC is intensively engaged in studies relating to housing issues and problems; to an updating of its regional database following the 2010 Census, including major efforts to survey changes in travel behavior and patterns and regional land use over the past 10 years; and efforts to update and extend the regional flood hazard database and floodplain mapping. In addition, planning efforts to address the transit challenges that face the Region continue, including both short-range five year planning efforts for the Region's transit operators and strategic planning with the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority to address long term structural problems in funding and delivering transit services in the Region. By mid-decade, SEWRPC and its planning partners in the Region must complete a major review, update, and extension of the regional land use and transportation plans to meet Federal planning requirements.
Copies of “Master Planners: Fifty Years of Regional Planning in Southeastern Wisconsin” may be obtained from:

1. Over the counter at SEWRPC headquarters
   W239 N1812 Rockwood Drive
   Waukesha, Wisconsin, 53188
   Cost: $29.00

2. Telephone SEWRPC at: 262-547-6721,
   Cost: $29.00 & shipping

3. Email SEWRPC at: historybook@sewrpc.org
   Cost: $29.00 & shipping