

COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET SERIES

#6 – Development Impact Analysis

With the possible exception of motherhood, apple pie and baseball, there is probably no American concept as idealized as 'growth'.

Christian Science Monitor, March 30, 1977.

Community environmental impact

Community growth and change has been viewed as healthy and desirable. A community that was not growing was thought to be stagnant. Growth provided jobs, income, tax base, cultural amenities and other positive features. However, citizens are reconsidering these attitudes in recognition of the social, environmental and economic costs of growth. Changes in the community are not a free lunch that is easily digestible. Tradeoffs may occur because of change. Increased air, water and noise pollution, loss of open space, and traffic congestion are common examples of costs related to community development.

Development decisions are often made without a good understanding of their impact on the environment. The risk – is that the local environment will be affected in a way that the community does not want.

What can a community do to make wise environmental decisions?

A development impact assessment can identify the deficiencies or tradeoffs between possible alternatives or courses of action and the impacts associated with each alternative. This assessment can also determine the groups (users) that may be directly or indirectly affected by the project or

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET SERIES

#1 – OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

#2 – TAKING STOCK

A questionnaire to summarize information about the community and consider how to manage environmental resources.

#3 – INFORMATION IN LAND USE PLANNING

Describes how to integrate environmental information into community land use plans

#4 – THE ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

A one page overview useful for explaining the inventory process to potential users.

#5 – INVENTORY WORKSHEETS

Inventory the community environment, open space lands, and land in consideration for changed uses. Worksheets identify what questions to ask, and are best completed with the assistance of a technical advisory. Fact sheets for some topics are included in #9, Support Resources.

#6 – DEVELOPMENT IMPACT ANALYSIS

What is it and how to use it?

#7 – POTENTIAL IMPACTS FROM DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

Provides a worksheet to guide review of potential impacts from a proposed development along with an example, summarizing potential impacts from construction activity.

#8 – HOW TO SET UP THE IMPACT PROCESS

The Leopold Matrix and instructions.

#9 – SUPPORT RESOURCES

Provides background information about air quality, cultural features, floodplain protection, groundwater, shorelands and wetlands, the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA).

action. Information of this kind can be critically important to community leaders and residents concerned with development decisions.

Environmental impact assessment is a process that includes the following steps, described in more detail in *Factsheets #2, #3, and #4*:

Steps to impact assessment:

In advance of receiving development proposals:

1. Inventory environmental, health, social, economic, and regulatory aspects of the site and the surrounding region
2. Clarify community values about the site and its environmental setting
3. Create a local policy that reflects community values about the site

After proposals for site have been received:

4. Evaluate development proposals within the policy framework
5. Decide based on the policy framework

Each step is linked in the evaluation process. Impact analysis helps a community stay in touch with its environmental priorities and allows for discussion about a community's capacity for development given those priorities.

Why do communities evaluate the impacts of proposed developments?

Changes in land use or major developments--especially those that are unusually large, unique or precedent setting--can have substantial impacts upon a community's facilities and services (such as water/sewer systems, schools, social services, streets, etc.) and upon the quality of the community's air, land, water and wildlife resources. Most communities want to understand, in advance of development, what those impacts might be so they can plan to meet new service demands in orderly and fiscally responsible ways, ameliorate environmental damages, and suggest or require modifications to the proposed development that are consistent with community wide goals for its environment.

Evaluations of the impacts of proposed developments can have several specific benefits for the community, as well as for the project's developer. Evaluation results can, for instance:

- Promote local discussion for understanding of the proposal
- Bring issues out into the open and deal with them explicitly
- Ensure consistency and fairness by applying a systematic procedure from one proposal review to the next
- Suggest ways of changing the proposal so that it becomes more responsive to local needs
- Provide information for and help justify the public decision; e.g., a zoning amendment, special permit, variance, subdivision plan approval

- Identify public facilities and services that may need to be built or extended, or whose operating schedule and procedures may need to be modified
- Identify local issues which go beyond the development proposal, suggesting an agenda for community action (e.g., revising zoning requirements, studying certain public facilities in more depth). Analysis of a specific and perhaps controversial major development can provide concreteness and a sense of urgency.

Impact analysis should not be used, however, to delay a proposal to death. Where imposed simply as an extra "hurdle," analysis is unfair to the developer, legally questionable, and often wastes the developer's and community's time, money and energy.

Impacts of developments

To a certain extent, the impacts of each proposed development are unique. Impacts will vary depending upon:

- *The size and nature of the development.* A small low density residential subdivision, for example, may have a much different impact on the environment than will a large regional shopping mall. This refers to impacts during development/construction as well as impacts from the operation of the facility itself.
- *The character of the natural environment being impacted.* The 'carrying capacity' of a natural environment—that is, its ability to support or sustain use—will vary depending upon such factors as soil type, drainage patterns, vegetative cover, etc.
- *The social and economic character of the community.* For example, communities with well-developed—or even with excess capacity in—social services systems (schools, etc.) may be much more able to cope with a development than less well-developed communities.

Communities will want to ascertain how the proposed project will affect the following environmental resources:

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| ▪ Aesthetic Qualities/ Scenic Resources | ▪ Human Health/Environmental Hazards |
| ▪ Agricultural Land Resources | ▪ Plant Communities |
| ▪ Cultural Features | ▪ Surface Water Resources/Water Supply |
| ▪ Geographic Setting/Soil and Mineral Resources | ▪ Waste Reduction |
| ▪ Groundwater/Water Supply | ▪ Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat |

Exactly what questions should be asked depends on the type of project. Each phase of the project will also have its own unique set of potential impacts. Many resources have been published which provide technical detail about specific project activities and potential categories of impacts. An environmental consultant can assist the community to identify concerns specific to their project. More ideas about what questions to consider for each topic are included in the companion publication #5 - Inventory Factsheets and Worksheets.

Can communities depend upon the Wisconsin and National Environmental Policy Acts (WEPA and NEPA) alone to take care of evaluating impacts from proposed developments?

The Wisconsin and National Environmental Policy Acts (WEPA and NEPA) only affect evaluation of impacts from developments proposed by the Wisconsin or federal government. These acts require state or federal agencies to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for "major actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment." For example, an EIS might be required for the development of highways, new buildings, projects which include government financing and projects which require government permitting. These policies cannot be used to stop, approve or modify projects on their own.

Refer to *Factsheet #3 - Using Information About Environmental Resources in Land Use Planning* for information about environmental management tools available to communities.

Working with a consultant

The factsheets in this series are designed to assist citizens in understanding what questions to ask about their local environment – it's care and management. An environmental engineer or other environmental consultant can provide specific analysis and recommendations for your site. However, it is up to the community that hires the consultant to provide direction to the investigation and review results with community values in mind, to assure that the community can pursue its own vision for a quality life.

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