Area Planning for Water Projects

Kenneth L. Schellie, AIP, ASLA
Schellie Associates, Planning Consultants, Indianapolis

The position of the community or regional planner in regard to water projects is substantially different from that of the water project planner. The latter, as his designation implies, is primarily concerned with the immediate physical details of the project: its specifications, engineering determinations, costs, design, etc. The regional planner is concerned with the development of an area-wide comprehensive plan embodying a host of physical, social, and economic considerations and with its implementation over a long period. A water project may be a single, albeit highly significant, project among projects.

The comprehensive plan, as we view it, is both a policy and a design for the appropriate utilization of land and the provision of facilities to serve the land use pattern. Its development is based on the historical record and on estimates of future potential of the land and its resources. Studies and analyses are made of the area’s physical characteristics such as topography, soils, climate, and other environmental factors; of the population, its growth, structure, and social indices; of the pattern of existing public and private development; and, of the area’s economy and its potentials. From these, sound projections can be made of land use needs and the installations needed to service the land use pattern and the people. Also included are determinations of the particular wants and preferences of the people. All these factors are integrated into the designs and policies of the comprehensive plan, together with recommendations such as regulations and public installations budgeting, which form the machinery to implement the plan.

This is not a simple or easy process, but it is entirely practicable in most areas under our present technology and legal authority. The problems arise under three circumstances:

1. Where it is necessary to integrate into a program highly significant services and installations over which the local planning authority has no control or even adequate knowledge.

2. Where planning cannot be done on a truly area-wide basis.

3. Where the necessary machinery, technical or legal, is not available to effect adequate planning or planning implementation.
The provision and installation of a water resource project by a governmental agency generates all three problems at the present time but it has the potential of facilitating truly excellent area-wide planning. Typically, the project is conceived and executed by the federal and state governments but causes substantial and thoroughgoing impacts on local governments. The local units are expected to accommodate dislocations of land use, public facilities, people, and economy, but have little or no voice in its planning and execution and, in fact, are virtually denied access to the detail of the project plan until all determinations are made. The local unit, for example the county, is handed a completed project labeled as a handsome gift from on high, which it may be, but carrying with it a whole series of dislocations and told essentially:

"Look what we have done for you, you lucky people, see that you take care of it. Of course, we have closed some roads, provided an attraction to bring in thousands of people who will require more roads, and other services; we have retired a good many acres from agriculture and possibly thrown the economy out of gear; we have decided what recreational places will be provided and where. We'll handle the project—you take care of its effects."

This is not planning—and it not only happens in the case of water projects. It has happened with highway relocations and other public installations as well.

The impact of these installations directly affects broad areas. Yet, the local units of government in Indiana, the cities, towns and counties, are the only agencies in the state with the statutory authority to prepare comprehensive plans for any part of the state. Therefore, as far as Indiana is concerned, area planning in scale with water projects represents something to be hoped for rather than something readily accomplished. There is no state machinery to develop a comprehensive state plan, and no specific legislation for regional planning agencies that are constituted to assist in the process. These I feel, we sorely need. Indeed, legislation to assist in both state and regional planning (similar to that existing in other states) was introduced in the late lamented session of the General Assembly, passed the House and was ready for second reading in the Senate when the regular session adjourned.

Therefore, we are faced with the problem in “Area Planning for Water Projects,” that the local planning agency is by-passed in the planning of the water project; there is no state or regional planning machinery that can undertake a comprehensive planning program for
an area affected by a water project or any similar project that cuts across county lines, and no unified planning authority representing local interests which can meet on common ground with the state and federal agencies involved. So, we miss the opportunity to do the kind of planning job that should be done with water projects (and many others as well), planning that incorporates all elements of the program—flood control, highways, recreation and local interests—from conception to completion. As a matter of fact we do not have “area” planning at all. We have some local planning agencies that carry that title, but they are all confined to a single county and, in my opinion, the county as a geographical and political entity, is inadequate for “area” planning.

The problem is illustrated, I believe, by reference to the Monroe Reservoir. The reservoir lies in three counties—Monroe, Brown and Jackson—and certainly any logical concept of area planning would stipulate that the “area” should include all of the territory in the vicinity of the reservoir, but this is not the case. Our office has been working with the Monroe County Plan Commission in the development of a comprehensive plan for that county, which includes a substantial part of the reservoir. When this work was largely completed, we were engaged by Brown County to do a similar program for that county which includes more of the same reservoir. Jackson County which includes more of the reservoir, has not, to my knowledge, made any progress in that direction.

The same problem is on the horizon with respect to the Brookville Reservoir—Franklin County is proceeding with a planning program; Union County which is also affected, is not. Other projected reservoir projects in the state are in a similar situation. And this happens in other states as well; we are working with Shelby County, Illinois, which contains the bulk of the Shelbyville Reservoir on the Kaskaskia River, the balance being in Moultrie and Christian Counties. Fortunately, planning programs are under way in each of those counties and their planning consultants are unifying their efforts to produce an integrated plan for the entire reservoir area as a component of the three county plans, but this is a makeshift procedure.

This, it seems to me, is “a helluva way to run a railroad.” Moreover, in working with the individual counties, we have found it difficult to determine precisely what is going to happen with respect to roads and other public installations in the area as a result of the water project. Such decisions being made outside of the local planning agency provide a series of question marks, the answers to which the authorized planning agency is expected to guess.
In contrast to the half-planning and makeshift planning we are experiencing in regard to these water project areas, let me cite a planning program which offers a number of examples. We have just completed a comprehensive plan for the Fox Valley Regional Planning Commission in Wisconsin. The region consisted of four cities, three villages, and seven townships consisting of parts of three counties. This is a homogeneous metropolitan unit with common physical, social, and economic characteristics which makes a workable planning unit. If area planning is to succeed in Indiana, we are going to have to be equipped to tackle our problems on a similar basis.

While the special state and regional planning legislation we had hoped to get out of this session was not forthcoming, there is an opportunity to do the job now. The 1957 Interlocal Cooperation Act permits any group of political jurisdictions to do jointly what they can do individually through contractual agreements. This is essentially the same legislative authority used to organize Wisconsin’s Fox Valley Regional Planning Commission. So it is possible to get the counties, cities, towns, and townships together to form area and regional planning agencies that can produce the results. The area planning program here, if it to be most effective in meeting the problems associated with the Monroe Reservoir, should include all of the Salt Creek water-shed irrespective of political jurisdictions, or at least be carved out of the counties, by townships perhaps, to incorporate all of the territory so that a reasonable area plan could be prepared. Assuming of course, that the agencies concerned with the design and development of the reservoir would cooperate with such an area or regional planning agency.

If area-wide planning can be done, the next question is how to get it done. I propose that the state and federal agencies involved in the development of water projects exercise leadership. Specifically the state and federal agencies should:

1. Insist that the local units of government affected by a water project organize regional planning agencies before the water project is undertaken. This, because the localities do not know what lies ahead, the state and federal agencies do.

2. Work with the regional planning commission to develop water project plans which are not only compatible with area-wide comprehensive plans but integral parts of those plans.

3. Provide the machinery by which the regional planning commission can work with other state and federal agencies to solve the dislocation problems created by the water project.
It is my opinion that in order to meet the pressing problems of flood control, the impact of the water project installation on the locality has been neglected. I am equally certain that the agencies involved are every bit as concerned about this problem as I am. Their procedures have been motivated by a conscientious interest to do the most effective and economical job possible within the framework of their legal authority. My plea is to permit the area in which the installation is to be placed to equip itself to do a comparable job in solving its problems.

In any event it can be expected that a great number of people will be attracted to the reservoir. Roads will be required to get them there; there will be a need for housing, trailer parks, boat docks, service stations, eating and drinking establishments, recreational facilities, sales and service for motors and boats, etc., and the public installations as well as the private, which will assist in meeting the newly-created needs.

The planning program will set down the ground rules for the use areas for commercial and accommodation establishments in order to provide adequate service and be consistent with the present and future character of other uses in the vicinity. Residential occupancy of the land will be directed toward maximizing the benefits of waterside locations consistent with topographic and public health considerations (pool level fluctuations and their frequency will affect the fitness of such lands for seasonal or extended residential occupancy). Land subdivision regulations, establishing design and improvement standards, and zoning will provide the implementation tools to ensure appropriate private development at the project.

 Providing accessibility to the lands adjoining the reservoir has become a major problem. Dislocation of existing road systems by the installation of the water project is one important phase of this problem. Another is the inability of counties to construct new roads to take the place of those lost in the project, or to permit access to areas not previously served, but needing service by reason of their new status in relation to the reservoir. Planning such routes is not difficult—implementing that plan is! Here the emphasis should be on a higher degree of coordination between state and local highway planning agencies and the inclusion of a road building program, and its expense, into the water project cost.

In the past several years, our office has had the pleasure of working with several privately owned water utility companies in designing the utilization of lands adjoining three large reservoirs. In each case, the counties affected were able, perhaps with the influence of the Public Service Commission, to secure new public roads adjoining the reservoirs,
and where needed, across them, at the expense of the utility companies. This, it appears, is considered to be proper—and if so, why should not the same requirement apply in the case of publicly owned water projects? Or, do we operate under a system of double standards—one for private and one for public installations? This, it seems to me is eminently unfair and unwise. Surely there can be a better solution to the problem of roads in the vicinity of the reservoirs than we have had heretofore.

The planning elements referred to here have been largely associated with the water project itself; however, this is only one aspect of the planning situation. The influence of the project extends considerably beyond the immediate area. Bringing in large numbers of people and new activities creates a demand for public services which should be accommodated.

Local government will take action and various state and federal agencies are willing to provide assistance, but action is contingent on the local governments knowing what to expect, how to handle new problems, and where to get help.

The task before us then is to set up the machinery by which a water project may be advantageously integrated into its area of impact. The familiar procedure for comprehensive planning is adequate to deal with the problems resulting from a water project if it can be applied to the impact region. Under present circumstances, the most promising possibility for instituting area-wide planning lies with the responsible state and federal agencies who are in a position to stimulate local action and to assist in making local action effective. On their own part, the state and federal government need to offer local government a range of services to deal with the manifold problems arising from a water project. This task is not formidable and its accomplishment will benefit all concerned. I am certain that there will be no lack of cooperation in that direction on the part of local interests.