

ACTIVITY 4: WHAT PRICE OPEN SPACE?

Activity Summary

Students assume the characters of various people in a community that is faced with a decision about what to do with a piece of undeveloped property. Each student is provided with a detailed character description and is given some information about his or her character's position on the use of the property in question. The students present their "sides" of arguments at a role-played public hearing.

Introduction

As our population increases, our cities and suburbs expand. People need places to live. For many years the American Dream has generally included a piece of property with a single family residence on it.

As cities and suburbs expand, though, open space is lost. Many people who moved to a small town to have open space nearby are soon faced with the loss of that open space as others move to the community and as homes and businesses are built on undeveloped land. People often want to lock the gate behind themselves to maintain a small-town atmosphere.

Both individuals and governmental agencies must make difficult decisions about the development of land. The rights of the individual landowner must be weighed against the benefits and problems generated by the development of a piece of property. Private profit must be considered along with the general good. Land-use decisions often have effects on people from neighboring communities. Traffic to and from a new development may affect neighbors. Recreational land is often lost. Property values may increase or decline. Schools and other governmental agencies are impacted. Wildlife, possibly including rare, threatened, or endangered species, may be lost.

Most communities have zoning or planning commissions that make decisions about the use of land in their jurisdiction. There is generally opportunity for public input on major decisions. This activity is a simulation of such a hearing.

Grouping

Character Cards are provided for 13 roles. Individual students assume each role. You can add or delete roles to suit your needs, but if more than 13 or so roles are used, it is difficult for the students to remember what was said.

Time

Three 45- to 55-minute sessions

Anticipated Outcomes

The students will:

- increase their understanding of the complexity of land-use decision making.
- increase their ability to present arguments in public.

4.1 What Price Open Space?: Background Information

When an individual has a piece of property that he or she would like to **develop** or build on, the person generally needs to get approval from a **zoning** or planning commission. This is because what people do with their property will have impacts on others in the community.

If houses are built, there will be more people traveling the roads, more children in schools, and more need for various services such as police and fire protection. If businesses are built, there will be more traffic, waste to be disposed of, and more pollution. In any case, if undeveloped land is developed, there will be less **open space** and less wildlife habitat. Rare or endangered species may be threatened.

On the other hand, the development of the property will provide jobs for the construction workers. If houses are built, the residents will bring their skills and interests to the community, as well as increase the need for more schools, stores, and other services. If businesses are built, more jobs will be available.

In most communities, there is a general plan that has the land in the community designated or "**zoned**" for different uses such as residential, agricultural, open space, industry, and so forth. If, for example, one has some agricultural land that a person wants to build houses on, he or she would have to apply for a change of zoning from agricultural to residential. To make such a change, a hearing would be needed. The zoning commission hearing usually would involve concerned parties who want to tell the commission what they think of a proposed zoning change. The commissioners would listen to the testimony of various people, including land owners, developers, neighbors, "experts," and others. The commissioners then would make their decision.

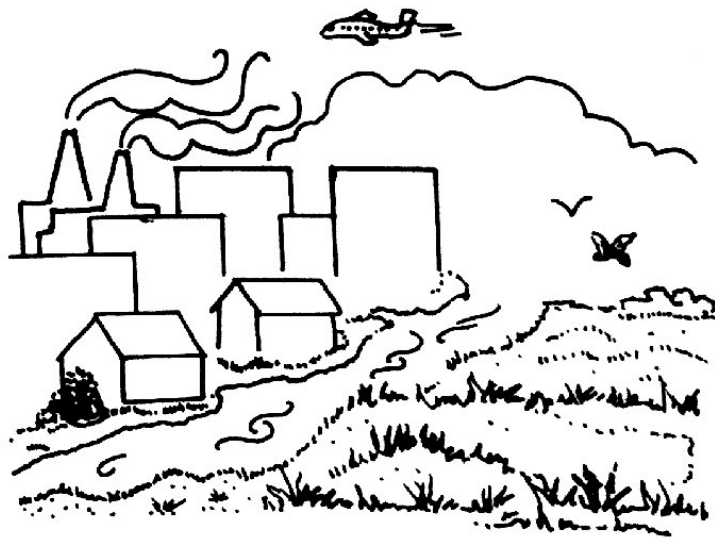
The commissioners would have to consider both the rights of individuals and what is best for the general community. Each individual, of course, has his or her own preferences and ideas about what is best. It is hoped that the commissioners would vote for what they think is best for the community as a whole.

In this activity, you will play the part of a resident of the fictitious community of Thoreau. Thoreau has a population of about 10,000 people. The economy is okay, but not thriving. The Bailey Appliance Company is the major employer for the community, currently employing 600 people. They want to expand their operations. This would provide about 200 new jobs. To do this, though, they would have to enlarge their plant and destroy Butterfly Meadow and some adjacent land. In addition, about 180 new homes would need to be built.

There are two related proposals before the zoning commission:

Proposal #1 would change the zoning on Butterfly Meadow from agricultural to industrial.

Proposal #2 would change the zoning of land owned by Tom Olson from agricultural to residential zoning.



4.2 What Price Open Space?: Instructions

In this activity, some students in the class will take on the roles of various people at a zoning commission hearing. Some will be zoning commissioners. Others will be people who speak at the hearing. Others will have roles such as newspaper reporters, “experts” who provide reports, or concerned citizens who write letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Here is the procedure:

Day 1:

The students will be assigned their roles and begin to prepare for the hearing, which will be held tomorrow (Day 2). The roles include:

- a. **hearing participants with “Character Cards”:** These students will have Character Cards that describe characters that they will play at the hearing. Some will be zoning commissioners and others will be various interested parties from the community.
Their homework is to prepare their presentations for Day 2.
- b. **newspaper reporters:** These students will represent reporters who will write articles for local newspapers. At least one should be in favor of the proposed zoning change and at least one should be against it.
Their homework is to write their articles after the hearing and be ready to read them on Day 3.
- c. **expert witnesses:** These students will prepare reports to support the various viewpoints. They may write about such things as endangered species in the area, the need (or lack of need) for jobs, traffic patterns, whether there is enough water for the development, room in the schools, and so forth.
Their homework is to write their reports and present summaries of their reports on Day 3.
- d. **letter writers:** These students will write “letters to the editor” based on the hearing. They should either support or oppose the proposed development and should make reference to testimony heard in the hearings on Day 2.
Their homework is to write their letters and present them on Day 3.

Day 2:

The chairperson of the zoning commission presents the proposal and runs the meeting. The various people with Character Cards present their cases. The rest of the class take notes and begin to prepare their letters, articles, or reports.

Day 3:

The newspaper articles, reports, and letters are presented to the commission. After meeting briefly to discuss the proposal and the community input, the commissioners vote for or against the proposal. The class will then discuss the hearing.

4.3 What Price Open Space? Questions

1. What are some factors that zoning commissioners need to take into account when considering a zoning change?

2. If you were a zoning commissioner in this hearing, how would you have voted? What factor(s) were most important in this decision?

3. List some things that you would do if you wanted to make a presentation to a zoning or planning commission.

4. Discuss the statement that "If we don't develop the land now, we can change our mind later. If we develop it now, we can't change our mind later."

5. Find out when and where your local planning or zoning commission meet.
