Dear Nick:

I finally was able to get back to your paper. Congratulations, it’s excellent. I particularly liked the fact you put all three of us within the context of the times (1960) in which we started. For the fifteen years following the end of World War II this country had tried to provide the housing it had not been able to build during the terrible depression and the War. With new families and jobs most Americans cared less about the sprawling form of that growth. What they cherished was that their families had a house, a yard and a school close by for their kids.

By 1960, however, there were seeds of discontent with the formlessness of that growth. It is questionable whether the public felt as negative as us planners about the thing we called sprawl but we set out to find out. Then as now most planner/architects thought of community building as merely an extension of designing a house. To them a town, like a house, needs a form and we engaged in parochial arguments about whose form was the best. By selecting Columbia, Reston and Irvine you selected those that believed there was more to a town then a center, edge, greenbelts and distinctive buildings (with or without porches.) Your emphasis on the roles of governance and civic activism in establishing “community” provides an insight that is too often missed when both critics and admirers write about any of us.

I was, however, confused about the comment on page 210 (Irvine’s City Spirit) where you say: “This government developed a vision different from the Irvine Company, and the citizens gained enough power to change the Irvine Company’s plans.”

As to whether “the government developed a different vision for the city” only the individual council members can answer that. My reading of the 28 years since Irvine incorporated is that from time to time different individuals attempted to articulate what they characterized as their vision for the city. For the most part, however, they usually ran on a platform of defending their city’s village system, slowing growth and a commitment to “stand up to the Irvine Company.” Most recently, of course, opposing the commercialization of the deactivated Marine El Toro air base dominates all visions.

My vision was a collage of injecting a sense of place and community in the maze of Southern California, creating a balance of uses, diversity of populations and encouraging a participatory community.

For many of my peers that vision was too vague but for me it was formative in everything we did. It grew each day as we toiled on each part, whether it was the general plan, village plans, school locations, housing organization and ultimately encouraging and supporting the incorporation of Irvine.

Your references to Larry Agran imply he had an inordinately dominant role in the city’s history. I feel uncomfortable saying he was particularly more effective in charting the city’s growth that any number of other councilpersons. He was, however, one of the most effective and skilled political organizers in the city’s history. And he did attempt to create a significantly different vision of the city with his “grand boulevard scheme.” A scheme that cost the city over $1 million dollars of planning money and in the end cost him significant public support. My own evaluation of the scheme is that is was highly impractical and tremendously expensive.
However, I applaud him for his focus on affordable housing, open space and non-discrimination. As a representative of the Irvine Company, however, my job was to make sure that such visions translated into fair and workable ordinances. Something he wasn’t too adept at. He was brave to initiate the non-discrimination referenda and I publicly supported it. Unfortunately, it came at a time that the city’s residents had developed a strong image of him as a liberal posing as a conservative and our polls showed his open support of the referenda hurt the chances of approval more than supported it.

Your references to changing Irvine Company’s plans must primarily refer to the city’s reduction of the original 1971 county and Company general plan ultimate population from 500,000 to 240,000. The truth is that most general plans overestimate ultimate population. Such plans are developed well before detailed community plans and reflect up side estimates for purposes of sizing major utilities, etc.. Any examination of ultimate populations to original general plans will most often show that build out is at significantly smaller populations than shown on the general plan.

For the elected representatives lowering the general plan population was a political necessity. For the Company we offered little objection because we were at the point where we could more realistically estimate what it would be. And, under our projections we were comfortable with the reductions. In-fact, we had become concerned that if they used the higher projection we would be faced with higher infrastructure costs than needed. To characterize it as a change in plan or vision overstates its importance (except for political fodder.)

Again, an excellent paper. I’d appreciate a final version.

RAY