

MEMO

TO: Boulder Planning Commission, Other Interested Parties

FROM: Lee Nellis, FAICP

DATE: September 16, 2022

RE: Subdivision Design (and Process)

This memo is inspired by sitting in on your September 8 meeting. It was, I thought, an overall good meeting, including a number of thoughtful comments by citizens.

To the extent the meeting was frustrating for you, or applicants, or citizens (I have not heard that, just allowing for the possibility), its because you need a better system, or to say it more precisely, you need better guidance for subdivision review. I am going to compose another memo about that, but first, I want to say something about the basics of subdivision design.

Subdivision Design IS NOT About the Lots

It is so easy to focus on the lots, their number, size, and shape. But let's take a deep breath, step back, and ask a basic question: Why would someone buy a subdivision lot?

I will come to the idea of creating lots for stewardship, but 99 out of 100 subdivision lots are proposed to create places to build. That's why people buy the lots, isn't it? Even when a lot is held for speculation, its value to the speculator resides in its building potential .

So, why don't we focus on building sites first, then on the lots that are wrapped around them? Would that change how projects are designed and reviewed?

Before answering that question, though, I have another. What impact on the ground do lot lines have? They're a legal construct. Of themselves they generate no impacts. But what feature of most subdivisions generates the most impacts?

ITS About the Roads!

A poor choice of building sites can have adverse impacts downwind, downstream, on the neighbors, and on the community, but what is the impact of development that comes up at almost every hearing, almost everywhere? Traffic!

Traffic impacts are seldom what people fear. While it would be busy at times, a two-lane gravel highway that meets typical county standards is adequate to carry the entire traffic generation of Boulder (and more). Not all your roads are that good, of course, so there are places where you must talk about traffic.

But the potential impacts of roads go way beyond traffic. I used to tell students (and just got through telling the Lake George, NY PC) that every road is a watercourse. The hydrologic consequences of poorly planned, designed, and built roads can be grim. Roads may also affect slope stability, irrigation systems (too many culverts make a ditch hard to maintain), and wildlife.

And about the Building Sites

So, if you want to understand how a proposed subdivision will impact the community should a PC start by looking at the lot lines?

They're a distraction.

To understand a proposed subdivision, you need to think:

- first about the potential building sites, and
- then about how they will be tied together by roads.
- And, finally, as a reflection of those possibilities, what part/s of the parcel might better be left in agriculture or undeveloped?

Those are the first three things you need to understand. Everything else, including lot lines should revolve around them. This may be easy and obvious if you're thinking about truly urban development on suitable land. But its neither in Boulder, where access can be "interesting" (from both physical and legal perspectives) and the terrain imposes constraints, as well as offering opportunities.

Proper Concept Plan Review

So, what does this tell us about how to conduct concept plan review? That the best way to do it is on-site, where everyone can see where (and where not) it might make sense to site a structure or route a road. And where everyone can also see the existing use/s, roads, and neighboring properties. You can't really understand a proposed plan until you understand its context.

The developer (and while they may be your neighbor, when they start down the subdivision path, they are also a developer) should bring no more than a sketch. I would say that it could be on a placemat (and I have seen those). But it is best to have the potential building sites and roads shown to scale over a color aerial image that shows accurate boundaries of the parcel proposed to be subdivided and approximate locations of building sites and roads It is also important to have both the developer and her/his professional representatives there for the conversation. You want everyone to begin as much as possible on the same page.

I imagine I have you thinking about the Deer Creek proposal now. Most of the work they offered you should have waited until after concept approval. But they had no clear direction about that, which is one of the important reasons why Boulder needs a better subdivision process. You need to give prospective developers useful direction while what they have invested is still modest.

Look for a sequel soon.