Paul Morris is a principal of McKeever Morris, a design and planning firm in Portland. One, whose practice focuses on projects that support the region’s growth-control initiatives.

How did you become interested in growth management issues?

Ten years ago my partner, Mike McKeever, and I were involved in regional growth management initiatives and projects designed to protect solar access to homes in new residential developments. Our interest was that energy inefficiencies were not being considered in discussions about community development and growth management. Another issue was that it was easier and cheaper to develop on the fringe because projects there could escape some of the costs associated with development.

At that time, the Portland region was beginning to have substantive discussions about growth pressures. We obtained a grant from the local electric company to study how you could design neighborhoods, communities, and regions in an international fashion that would be more energy conserving, efficient and more livable.

Ultimately, we realized that urban design and regional planning go together. We developed a modeling process that lets us show the relationship between site design and regional growth policy. Our policy makes the ability to understand—a tangible fashion, using energy, land use, transportation and infrastructure costs—the implications of one development on the region.

What impact has this research had on the way you work today?

It has changed our practice. We don’t take part in a lot of the commercial development. We work on smaller projects, that take a short-term view of community benefit and are not willing to reenvision itself to be more urban oriented.

In our residential and mixed-use planning and design services, we work today on progressive developers who want to build low-density communities, not just spreading subdivisions. We’ve also altered our practice around natural resource conservation, management and restoration.

This has led us from being considered by the developers who don’t produce those kinds of projects or care about these issues. Any developer has a product they sell, one that is very carefully crafted. We try to show them the developmental savings and added value. This approach can bring to the projects, but for them to change would mean reinventing their business.

In hiring staff, from administrative support to senior managers, we don’t just look for people who are experts in their field, but we look for people who share our philosophy about community and growth. That provides stability for our company and confidence to our clients.

Do you work professionally, as well?

We’ve continued our research. There is a raging debate about regional development and the regional growth boundary to accommodate new development. We analyzed data from our neighborhood government (Mesco) and found that half of the development that occurs outside the boundaries was not built to the full potential. People who wanted to maintain the identity of their local government thought that there was a lot more potential than they had realized.

Sometimes we create projects, for example, in Oregon, most school districts have done large-scale facility plans, and some of these advocates have used inadequate school capacity as a growth-control lever. We find that school districts and local communities should work together to keep their plans integrated.

So, about five years ago, we teamed up with the planning director in Beaverton, where this issue was at a high pitch. She went to the state, which funded research. We sat down about how to integrate city, school and county planning. That led to the passage of legislation requiring that integrated planning be done statewide. Now school districts and communities are working together to establish when and where they’re going to need schools and how to fund them. Local school monies to stop development is not an option anymore.

What is your approach to participation?

We find ways to include broad ranges of people throughout the planning and design process. We never want to have people or to go to participate in same way or at the same time. Some might be on a steering committee. Others might attend a focus group. Still others might respond to polls or come to open houses. Others simply follow media reports.

Ultimately, the question is how much decision-making authority is given to participants. The biggest problem is setting up, on front, what the limits are. Many community leaders do not define what will make decisions or how they will be made. People aren’t used to being told what the limits of their participation are; they’re more frustrated by a lack of clarity—when it gets to the end and they don’t have as much of a role as they thought.

In any process, it is imperative to communicate early and often what the role and responsibilities are in a process and who has final decision-making authority. Then, always allow time for feedback. The process.

How do you balance your vision versus the goals of the community?

The less I am instilling in our beliefs in people, but providing the best technical research information, full information disclosure and understanding of the implications through common-sense communication techniques. This way, people can make their own best decision. Our experience has consistently illustrated that, giving the information in a clear decision making process, clients (whether publics or private) make the best decisions.

It’s also important to make small decisions incrementally, starting with the general and moving to the specific, not to expect that the whole decision can be made up front. It’s a risk: you may end up with a community that says it wants one and then everywhere. But, ultimately, most people realize they aren’t willing to pay the price for that, in terms of the impact on their quality of life, and economic growth and agriculture, and the cost of infrastructure.

infill housing development in Portland, Ore., is important to the region’s ability to live within its urban growth boundary.

[Since the text ends here, there is no need to continue with the given information.]

PLACES 123

INTERVIEW: PAUL MORRIS