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John F. Eades



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City Planning in West Palm Beach During the 1920s

by JOHN F. EADES

IN 1922 members of the newly formed Planning Board of the City of West Palm Beach agreed to have their municipality enter into a contact with city planner John Nolen. At the time, Nolen's planning firm was the largest in the United States, and Nolen, along with a small host of other planners, was busy laying the cornerstones of the planning profession. The shaky business relationship between Nolen and West Palm Beach was a short one, lasting only about a year. By the time Nolen fulfilled his contractual obligations, the planning activity in West Palm Beach had fallen into utter disarray. This article addresses the motivations behind the first planning movement, its brief activity, and the several factors that contributed to the early demise of city planning in West Palm Beach.

The West Palm Beach planning movement began with an eager start and a seemingly promising role for the development of the city. The nascent planning profession of the 1920s more an amalgamation of emerging theories and basic practices regarding urban policy and urban design than a coherent discipline, did have the unique American character of solidly embracing American capitalism— not laissez-faire raw market capitalism, but stable, organized, corporate capitalism. An interesting confluence of events occurred in West Palm Beach in the 1920s when planning activity, under the auspices of the local planning board and its expert John Nolen and his firm, met with the raw market forces of unbridled land speculation— the Florida land boom from around 1924 to early 1926.¹

Scholars have concluded that American planning in the 1920s was motivated by economic imperatives. Planners of the 1920s for example, espoused the merits of scientifically allocating land for business in an urban space to meet the predetermined needs of an urban population. All this was to insure that urban areas would be

John F. Eades received his M.A. in history in 1992 from Florida Atlantic University.

1. George B. Tindall, "Bubble in the Sun," *American Heritage* 2 (August 1965), 76-83, 109-11.

efficient, less wasteful, and socially ordered. Controlled by a small elite corps of planners and civic leaders, planned cities would be an extension of the values of conservative, cautious businessmen. Planned cities would provide a controlled paternalistic authority over the spatial arrangement and business activity of the urban environment. Whether they heard about the new planning ideas in numerous popular magazines, the West Palm Beach leaders who gathered to form their planning committees did so in slow, economically placid times. When the trains and automobiles full of land-hungry buyers flooded into the local real estate offices to buy building lots in new subdivisions, the local planning activity sponsored by real estate businessmen collapsed. Its chief local proponents were pulled into the vortex of real estate activity, and John Nolen and the rest of the planning profession began heaping criticism on the rapid and wasteful growth of Florida cities. The West Palm Beach experience confirms that the pro-business stance of American city planning in its formative years was completely contrary to the unbounded capitalist form of speculative buying as evidenced during the Florida boom.²

Although the boom did much to lure away the early preplanning real estate businessmen who were the backbone of the West Palm Beach planning movement, the local government, from the start, complicated the entire process. The ideal for planners in creating well-planned small cities and towns was to create completely new towns. These garden cities or towns *de nova* had, as Nolen said, "No past to live down."³ Replanning and redesigning existing cities proved to be a much more challenging task than planning a new city. John Nolen realized in West Palm Beach that stable government was needed to effect his version of good planning. Nolen confided in the West Palm Beach planning board, "Without good government there is small prospect for good city planning."⁴ By the end of his contract, Nolen reflected frustration and general annoyance with the entire West Palm Beach affair.

Also described in this article is urban policy being discussed in an undemocratic way, and with some clear political and social agen-

2. See Richard E. Fogelson, *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ, 1986) and Blaine A. Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1975), 171-89.

3. Quoted from John Nolen, "Venice, A City of Inspiration," *Voice News*, n.d., in John Nolen Collection, Cornell University.

4. John Nolen to Orrin Randolph, January 3, 1923, Nolen Collection.

das— namely the forced segregation of the city's black populations. City-bound masses do not have a history of clamoring to city planners for plans. When the planning profession was still coalescing in the 1920s, it was customary for a small group of businessmen, civic leaders, or boosters to call in planning experts. In the case of West Palm Beach, some local planning advocates clearly had their own economic agendas foremost in mind rather than service to the community. In fact, the planning process there insulated itself from public participation and proved unpopular once preliminary plans were revealed.

The transformation of West Palm Beach from wilderness scrub land to a city replete with skyscrapers took a little more than 30 years. This rapid growth from 1900 to 1930 was representative of Florida, a state that experienced an urbanizing trend 20 years before the rest of the South and earlier even than some midwestern states. The permanent population increased from about 1,700 in 1910 to 35,000 in 1925.⁵

West Palm Beach was laid out in August 1893 by surveyors and engineers of Henry M. Flagler's East Coast Railroad just as the railroad was being completed from its terminals in Jacksonville down the east coast of Florida. The West Palm Beach town site was situated on the waterfront directly across Lake Worth from the Palm Beach site Flagler had chosen for a hotel resort. The West Palm Beach town site was laid out as a one-half-mile-by-one-mile rectangle with a commonplace north-south, east-west, and highly commercially "exploitable" grid pattern of streets. The grid arrangement ignored the natural topography, which included lake frontage, the high elevation of an ancient dune line, and low-lying marshlands to the west. Except for two angled, short streets that branched off from one of the main east-west streets (Clematis Street) to form a "v"-shaped lakefront public common area, the plan mirrored the bulk of town site development in the United States.

From its incorporation in 1894, when land-clearing crews were still laying down street beds in complete wilderness until shortly after the end of World War I, West Palm Beach remained a sleepy town on Flagler's southwardly expanding railroad line. For many years the town was populated mostly by railroad and Palm Beach

5. Population data is from West Palm Beach Bicentennial brochure, 1976, and the West Palm Beach file, Historical Society of Palm Beach County (hereinafter HSPBC)

hotel construction crews. It slowly evolved from a railroad siding utility town to a permanent place of some economic vitality. Modest development of permanent buildings gradually took place over the 20-odd years from the late 1890s to around 1919. West Palm Beach had become the county seat of Palm Beach County when it was split from Dade County in 1909. By 1919 the city boasted a small central business district, an expanding outward growth of suburban-rural development, a large school building, and an impressive centralized county courthouse. Tourism, small farming, transportation, construction, and retail and wholesale trade sustained the city's few thousand residents.⁶

Post-war recession from 1920 to 1922 gripped the industrial areas of the nation, but steady construction and seasonal tourism kept the recession at bay in the Palm Beaches. Mansions, designed by Addison Mizner and other noted architects, were erected in Palm Beach, and new subdivisions were platted and built to the north and south of the original gridiron plan of centralized West Palm Beach. Following the affluent winter residents of Palm Beach were middle-class tourists who came in record numbers between 1915 and 1925. West Palm Beach also accommodated the new automobiles that appeared at the end of World War I. In 1918 the last link of the Dixie Highway was completed, and automobiles began their first forays into a city originally designed for pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Traffic congestion, poor roadways leading to the city, and inadequate utility services and facilities within the city reflected the lack of preparation for growth.

A West Palm Beach Tourists' Club was established in 1920 to insure that entertainment and assistance were provided for the annual influx of visitors. The tourists, coming from the recession-plagued midwestern and mid-Atlantic states in 1920, balked at the "profiteering" tactics of the innkeepers and complained about the deteriorating condition of West Palm Beach. The elected leadership of the city, sensitive to the needs of tourists and the economic windfall they brought, responded to the complaints. The mayor and other community leaders promised to make repairs and provide a better tropical resort city for tourists and potential residents alike.⁷

At the same time that tourists were bitterly complaining about conditions in the city, the federal government was looking across

6. Donald Curl, *Palm Beach County: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, Calif., 1986).

7. *Palm Beach Post*, January 16 ,23, 1920.

the nation for places to establish homes for returning soldiers. The Everglades to the west of the city was considered for a brief time as a settlement location, but federal officials deemed the area to be inadequate because of a lack of roads. The canal to the Everglades was too precarious to serve as the sole major route to the region since its water levels rose and fell at rates which were then beyond human control. Activity in the Everglades west of the city commanded the attention of many observers. By 1919 F. E. Bryant and W. J. Conners were spending large sums on model and commercial farms there. The fecundity of the Everglades was discussed extensively and observers speculated about the impact Everglades agriculture would have on West Palm Beach. Many community leaders thought it was time to plan the future of the city and prepare for the commercial bounty they predicted would pour in from the Everglades. West Palm Beach, it was believed, would no longer be solely a tourist destination since the "tourist crop" would be augmented by extensive agricultural commerce and trade. The five-month tourist season would be integrated with year-round agricultural commercial activity.⁸

City planning circulated widely in the popular press during the early 1920s. Many outside the profession saw planning as a quick panacea for sick cities. The allure of planning to the middle-class leaders of many cities was tempting since planning professionals were offering ideas and suggesting strategies for economic growth. West Palm Beach planning advocates felt they had ample evidence that planning worked and was needed to solve their city's problems. In 1920, West Palm Beach planning advocates had to look no further than six miles north to see the new city planning practices being realized in a large new town development called Kelsey City. The offices and promotional newspapers of Harry S. Kelsey's East Coast Finance Corporation flooded the region with announcements about the new planned town. The *Kelsey City News* of January 1920 gave an artist's conception of Kelsey City of the future. Kelsey promised that his new town would be a combined resort and agricultural prototype for the neighboring farming region.⁹

8. Roger W. Babson, "Bullish on the South: Depression in Business Passed by Florida," *Boston Transcript*, February 18, 1922, Nolen Collection; *Palm Beach Post*, April 14, 1919.

9. *Palm Beach Post*, January 24, November 30, 1919. *Kelsey City News*, January 1920, in Kelsey file, HSPBC.

In 1919 Kelsey and his wife left their Brookline, Massachusetts, home to spend the winter season in Palm Beach. Kelsey had just sold his chain of restaurants and, once in Palm Beach, he parlayed the proceeds into extensive Palm Beach real estate holdings. By December 1919 reports circulated that Kelsey had plans for his newly acquired property. The intriguing aspect of Kelsey's grand scheme, to many observers in West Palm Beach, and one of Kelsey City's most touted selling points, was that it was a completely "scientifically" designed city, laid out by the Olmsted firm, operated by the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted, the eminent landscape architect and city planning pioneer. The 1919 plan for Kelsey City incorporated innovative street arrangements, avenues to accommodate automobile traffic, ample public parks, land for public buildings, and a system of zoning that compartmentalized the city into residential, business, and industrial districts controlled through deed restrictions. Everything about Kelsey City was progressive, experimental, and demonstrative. This created a stir of excitement among community leaders in West Palm Beach.¹⁰

Kelsey, however, turned out to be a tragic figure in Florida real estate development. He did not capitalize quickly on his investment. The entire street system and utilities infrastructure of the Olmsted plan were put in place by local contractors before his sales team offered lots for sale. Kelsey also had a genuine concern about the state's weak economy and sought to provide economic viability for the town by granting generous incentives to small industries to settle there. The planning and long-term strategies were not enough to prevent financial ruin in the wake of the 1926 Florida land market collapse. By 1928 Kelsey and his town were bankrupt, and the state had revoked the Kelsey City municipal charter. The town formed again during the depression under the new name of Lake Park.

Successful New York realtor, banker, and subdivision developer Alfred H. Wagg joined the Kelsey City sales force in 1920. Wagg quickly became a convert to the ideas of the city planning movement. Its practicality and impact on real estate values made Wagg enthusiastic for planning. He became an avid spokesman for planning in West Palm Beach where he had several large land holdings and a subdivision development of his own. The quintessential real estate

10. Numerous articles from the *Palm Beach Post* cover the early founding of Kelsey City. See Kelsey City file, HSPBC.

salesman— a Babbit-like town booster and gadfly— Wagg, son of a Methodist minister, was orator and toastmaster at nearly every social club in West Palm Beach. His business and social activities eventually led to his election as state senator in 1926. Through his work at Kelsey City, Wagg became associated with John Nolen who was hired for a modest fifty dollars to consult on the Kelsey City project.¹¹

The combination of tourist dissatisfaction and the example of Kelsey City prompted a small group of West Palm Beach boosters, community leaders, and especially real estate interests, in conjunction with the city's administration, to prepare a new city charter in 1921. Among the provisions of the charter revision were a substantial enlargement of the city's boundaries, a new system of government that divided the city into three boroughs, and the creation of a new arm of city government to be known as the City Planning Board of West Palm Beach.¹²

During the formative years of 1920-1921, when West Palm Beach boosters coalesced to form the two informal civic planning organizations, support for planning varied among different groups. All influential civic and commercial groups generally favored planning, but their own ideas of what planning entailed differed. Members of the Women's Club became supporters of local planning because of the moral uplift and aesthetics associated with the City Beautiful movement, spawned by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. The residual effects of the City Beautiful movement and later City Monumental movement also generated support for local planning initiatives among some members of the Rotary, Masons, and Chamber of Commerce.

Even by 1920, City Beautiful themes remained popular among the general public in West Palm Beach. The city's business elites, primarily the larger real estate developers and principal taxpayers, found more substance in the emerging City Efficient movement offered by the nascent planning profession. City Efficient ideas were concerned with social control and economic activity stimulated through planning. The City Efficient movement called for experts. When the proponents of City Efficient methods failed to rally widespread support for their ideas in West Palm Beach and to spend municipal dollars for experts, they lapsed back to the popular strains of City Beautiful themes to enlist support from influential

11. See Alfred Wagg file, HSPBC.

12. *Laws of Florida, 1921, Special Acts*, vol. 2, 2225-29.

members of various civic groups. While Nolen urged the downplaying of aesthetic enhancement, it seems that some important supporters of planning were more interested in making the city a prettier place than they were in making it a more efficient one.

After cutting away some of the boundaries of the proposed charter revision, the state legislature approved it in 1921. In December of that year a planning board of nine members met to plan for the future of the city. In 1921, however, there was little legal precedent for a strong planning board. The planning profession itself was considering the legalities of such an agency having strong police powers over private property. The City Planning Board of West Palm Beach, then, was only an advisory committee of nine unpaid community and business leaders. Through his business dealings at Kelsey City, Wagg became a strong proponent for bringing John Nolen to West Palm Beach to prepare a plan for the city. Wagg had joined Nolen on a tour of European cities just months before his appointment to the West Palm Beach planning board. The city commission demanded that competitive bids be obtained instead of simply hiring Nolen. Once the bids were received, Wagg got his way, and Nolen was awarded a contract to prepare a plan for the redesigning of West Palm Beach. Citing budgetary constraints, the city commission was slow to sign the contract. For \$6,500, Nolen would survey the city and provide a general plan for development. At about the same time in 1922, planning officials in St. Petersburg, Florida, also awarded a contract to Nolen for similar planning services.¹³

It is revealing that the data Nolen gathered for his planning design and study for West Palm Beach consisted mostly of local brochures, maps from local developers, and short, formal interviews with the planning board members. Nolen conducted his surveys and returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to begin working out an interim report and preliminary plan which he submitted at the end of 1922.

The sharpest reaction to Nolen's preliminary plan came from city manager Karl Riddle. Riddle became convinced that the city would benefit most by implementing some type of zoning law. He also expressed concern about the "protection of investments" of existing landholders, of which he was one. The reception of Nolen's preliminary report and plan actually heralded the end of

13. Minutes, City Planning Board of West Palm Beach, January 6, 1922 to April 7, 1922.

the first planning movement in the city. City commissioners voiced the opinion that it was unworkable. After several joint meetings between December 1922 and March 1923, the city commission and planning board decided to follow their city manager's advice and study the question of zoning. The vehement specter of racial hatred came to the fore in the initial zoning meetings when the city's new mayor made allusions to razing black neighborhoods. Several commissioners wanted to relocate the blacks to marshlands west of the city. Lengthy transcripts of the joint meetings were sent off to Nolen so he could adjust his plans accordingly. Nolen, however, did not follow the exact dictates from the city agencies.¹⁴ Furthermore, in late 1922, the city had embarked on improvement projects of street widening and repair, as well as sewer and sidewalk installation. All of the improvements were funded through a series of unprecedented large bond issues. Land in the city was changing ownership and being parceled up at an accelerated rate during this time.

Nolen finished the final West Palm Beach general plan, divided among nine separate maps and a 66-page report, and sent it to the planning board in June 1923. The report was extremely general and concentrated on problems such as the relocation of the existing railroad and traffic congestion. It placed more emphasis on viability than on resort-like ambiance for the city. The report presented nothing new to residents. The general plan had all of Nolen's trademark features—ample parks, “formal, almost baroque” street arrangements, and a detailed civic center that would serve as the heart of the city. Separate colored planning maps included specifics for thoroughfare and park placement and a zoning scheme that recommended where blacks should be resettled.¹⁵

At the same time, in mid-1923, a new charter for St. Petersburg passed the state legislature. The St. Petersburg “law with claws” provided for detailed zoning laws and a stronger planning commission with elaborate police powers conferred to the city commission. Fearing that the new laws would create a “political junta,” invade the “privacy of homes,” and give the planning commission “arbi-

14. *Ibid.*, December 15, 1922; “City Planners Send Nolen's Scheme Back to Him for Revision,” *Palm Beach Post*, c. 1922, Nolen Collection.

15. John Nolen, “City Planning Proposal, West Palm Beach, 1923,” in Nolen Collection; Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969), 233.

trary power," the voters of St. Petersburg rejected the new charter.¹⁶ The St. Petersburg defeat did not bode well for the proponents of planning in West Palm Beach.

Perhaps sensing the impending failure of planning, one-third of the planning board members resigned after the St. Petersburg decision. Planning advocates Alfred Wagg and Orrin Randolph cited pressing personal and business matters as reasons for their resignations. It is interesting that Alfred Wagg immediately began buying up parcels of West Palm Beach land and developing tracts for industrial use. These areas were situated on the soon-to-arrive Seaboard Airline Railroad running through the city from Okeechobee to Lemon City, Wagg also had business interests in subdivision developments in the southern portion of the city. Randolph continued to develop the Northwood subdivision area which comprised a large section of the northern part of the city.

It is easy to identify the key people involved in bringing planning ideas into circulation in West Palm Beach. They were essentially the same people who served on the first planning board and some of the city's leaders. These planning advocates were also principle landholders and developers. Although their actions introduced planning ideas and a quasi-official planning board to the city of West Palm Beach in sluggish economic times just after World War I at the advent of the boom, many of these same people abandoned the planning process to become participants in the speculative frenzy of the time. The Florida land boom rendered impossible the controlled growth and development necessary for the maintenance of stable land values. Greed and raw market forces, especially during 1924-1925, scuttled the first real planning action in West Palm Beach.

For months, between late 1923 and late 1925, the city commission failed to appoint new members to the vacant positions on the planning board, and the board itself conducted no meetings. In early 1924 construction activity accelerated in the city. New subdivisions were built without the board's approval. On a trip to the city in 1924, Nolen observed "great progress" in construction but little opportunity to provide for the future. As the Florida boom reached a peak in 1924-1925, new subdivisions and other development

16. The *St. Petersburg Independent* opposed the charter while the *St. Petersburg Times* generally supported it. The St. Petersburg voters rejected the document by a vote of 934 to 138 according to the *Palm Beach Post*, September 2, 1923.

projects were proposed for large amounts of city space. The areas Nolen had planned for parks and thoroughfares quickly disappeared under the gridiron street arrangements of the many new residential subdivisions. Nor did the city government— which had changed several times between 1923 and 1925— find a justification for the costs which would have been involved in condemning private property for public purposes as Nolen had recommended.

The city became a patchwork of private developments. In September 1925 the *Palm Beach Post* reported that the West Palm Beach planning board was considered “virtually extinct.” New commissioners and a new mayor witnessed the phenomenal growth and quietly lamented that millions of dollars in public improvement work failed to keep up with the demands of the burgeoning city.

Soon after the land boom collapsed in early 1926, the West Palm Beach planning board was quickly reconstituted with new members. It secured a group of national planning experts to guide and advise the city on future planning. Even though the open expanses which Nolen had planned were gone, there were other planning considerations such as more detailed engineering for utilities. Along with the engineering consultants, the city hired Charles Leavitt to advise on overall planning and Robert Whitten, a national zoning expert, to guide it through the legal ramifications of implementing a zoning system. With characteristic boom-time hyperbole, the city manager proclaimed that West Palm Beach had assembled the “strongest and most noted advisory board ever retained by any city in the United States.”¹⁷

In 1926 Nolen toured both St. Petersburg and West Palm Beach when the National Conference on City Planning held its 18th annual convention in St. Petersburg and Palm Beach. The concerns expressed by the nation’s top planners received little attention in West Palm Beach. The planners’ criticisms of the mistakes Florida had made were less interesting to the local people than remarks that Florida had nothing to fear from competition from California. Nolen had once described Florida as the “last frontier of the United States” and the most promising for planning new

17. The appointment of Whitten was remarkable because of his controversial views on racial zoning in Atlanta. See Brownell, *Urban Ethos*, 184; and Seymour I. Toll, *Zoned American* (New York, 1968), 262. The zoning law adopted by West Palm Beach was a standardized one, segregating types of residential and commercial structures. See *Palm Beach Post*, September 19, 1925.

cities that “had no past to live down.” The list of his Florida projects includes the redesign plans of St. Petersburg; numerous subdivisions such as Tamiami city in Dade county, Maximo Estates near St. Petersburg, Orangetown near Fort Myers; and cities, as Venice and Clewiston, started from absolutely clean slates. Nolen’s shaky relationship with West Palm Beach had eroded completely by 1927.¹⁸

The end of the boom gradually pushed the city, and the rest of boomtime Florida, into recession. Many improvement projects were abandoned and citizens began voting against bond issues. City planning became a function of the city’s engineering department and later became a separate branch in the city government. Planning experts and consultants were quickly replaced with financial consultants to help the city deal with its burden of bond indebtedness. The city landscape, especially the downtown area centering on Clematis Street, remained virtually unchanged until after World War II. Even then, development was slow until it began to pick up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The vital center of the city languished as sprawl and fringe development took over the role of downtown.

The rapid growth of West Palm Beach was the result of extensive private investment in numerous subdivisions and business blocks. Until the collapse of the boom in 1926, private enterprise operated with little or no governmental power to control the rapid, sometimes frenzied, development. Much to the dismay of planners, cautious, planned, regulated growth was ignored while the city grew rapidly according to the caprice of private investors.

Historians, mainly those drawn from the planning profession, have been more inclined than others to make perfunctory, reductionist conclusions about the desirability and effectiveness of the early planning movement. They often conclude that past planning was either a success or failure— either plans were implemented as designed or plans were shelved and forgotten. In the case of planning in West Palm Beach during the 1920s, the judgement has been fairly conclusive that the planning board and Nolen, despite his planning acumen, failed.¹⁹ Although West Palm Beach quietly shelved the planning results of Nolen’s labors, either-or, success-or-

18. Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890*, 234; John Hancock, “New Towns in Florida,” in *The New City*, ed. Jean F. Lejune (University of Miami, 1991), 74.

19. Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890*, 234-37; Hancock, “New Towns in Florida,” 69.

failure conclusions are hardly adequate. West Palm Beach was not entirely a city planning failure. The planning experience in the city in the early 1920s progressed haltingly, with remarkable inefficiency and undemocratic furtiveness, but still it managed to produce some positive results. The introduction of controlled zoning in West Palm Beach in 1926 based on drafts of standardized zoning laws, and the raised consciousness of city leaders to planning and the ultimate view that planning is a function of local government stand atop the achievements made through the planning experience of the 1920s.