



## Colombo shapes city's development planning

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New Mexico Business Weekly

Updated: 8:00 p.m. ET April 2, 2006

Lou Colombo is comfortable being the largely unknown player behind Albuquerque's planned growth policies.

But observers say his anonymity hasn't kept Colombo from exerting almost unlimited sway over planning decisions.

Colombo, policy and budget coordinator for the Albuquerque City Council, was the mastermind behind the city's planned-growth strategy (PGS), including its controversial impact fees.

The fees are imposed on developers who build on the fringes of the city in places such as the Westside and are used to pay for infrastructure such as roads and schools.

Colombo says the fees are an effective tool for curbing growth in areas referred to as urban sprawl and to encourage development in older parts of town.

Recently, Colombo says he's also been working with neighborhood associations to draft localized sector-development plans.

Like the planned-growth strategy, sector development plans also seek to control growth. But they approach the issue neighborhood-by-neighborhood in order to address specific local needs.

Pat Verrelle, president of the Vineyard Estates Neighborhood Association, which includes part of the La Cueva sector development-plan area on Albuquerque's north side, praises Colombo's promotion of neighborhood planning.

She says sector plans allow communities like hers to update zoning codes and to address local needs not covered in the city's planned growth strategy.

"We don't want the cheapest version of a franchise moving here because they could and didn't have to comply with design standards because they simply didn't exist," Verrelle says.

But, Colombo has his detractors, especially among developers.

Tina Cummins, a real estate broker and former city councilor, says Colombo is an example of an unelected official "pushing his own personal agenda in the background."

"When he doesn't agree with a councilor, he takes it upon himself to figure out how to get it done," Cummins says. "He's manipulating the process."

Cummins, who opposed the PGS when the City Council adopted it in 2002, complains the impact fees unduly hinder development on the Westside. She says they don't stop sprawl because people still build elsewhere, like Rio Rancho, and commute to the Westside.

As for sector plans, she says Colombo and city planners have put them on the back seat while the planned growth strategy drives city policy.

Colombo admits the process hasn't always been smooth. He says amendments to the East Downtown (EDo) sector plan in 2005, for instance, didn't incorporate infrastructure needs such as safety and parking along Central Avenue. He says revisions were made at the last minute by the City Council to address such issues, but more focus, initially, needs to be on sector planning.

But Colombo maintains that without impact fees, Westside residents would pay more taxes for infrastructure. He says development should be directed to areas where growth can be absorbed by infrastructure. Otherwise, problems such as the Westside's recent school shortages emerge, he observes.

Colombo's supporters say he's one of the smartest and more experienced planners around.

He holds a doctorate degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Michigan and has served since 1980 as an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico's School of Architecture and Planning.

Between 2003 and 2004, he was a visiting professor at Virginia Tech in Alexandria, Md., where he studied development growth in high density neighborhoods. Some of his own research was used to draft Albuquerque's planned growth strategy.

As for his role in city planning, District 6 City Councilor Martin Heinrich says it makes perfect sense for the legislative body to have someone such as Colombo on staff dealing with planning issues.

"We are the final land use authority. It would be ludicrous not to have a qualified planner on staff," says Heinrich.

The redevelopment of East Downtown (EDo), adds Heinrich, was largely influenced by Colombo and is the perfect example of pursuing the planned growth strategy along public transportation corridors.

EDo was recently listed by Good Jobs First, a resource center focused on economic development policies, as an example of smart growth with infill development along public transportation hubs.

Heinrich says Colombo's policies have helped create revenue for public investments and encouraged private developers to locate projects in "neighborhoods that haven't seen new houses and developments in decades."

But developers say Colombo's policies are a mixed-bag. Robert Lupton, president of the Home Builders Association of Central New Mexico, says he believes in planned growth and impact fees, but adds that the ordinance adopted by the City Council was not what was recommended by a panel of citizens appointed by the council to evaluate the policy.

He says the council approved what Colombo envisioned was "best for Albuquerque," even though the panel that examined the policy disagreed with the impact fee structures.

"His vision is what has been adopted," Lupton says.

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