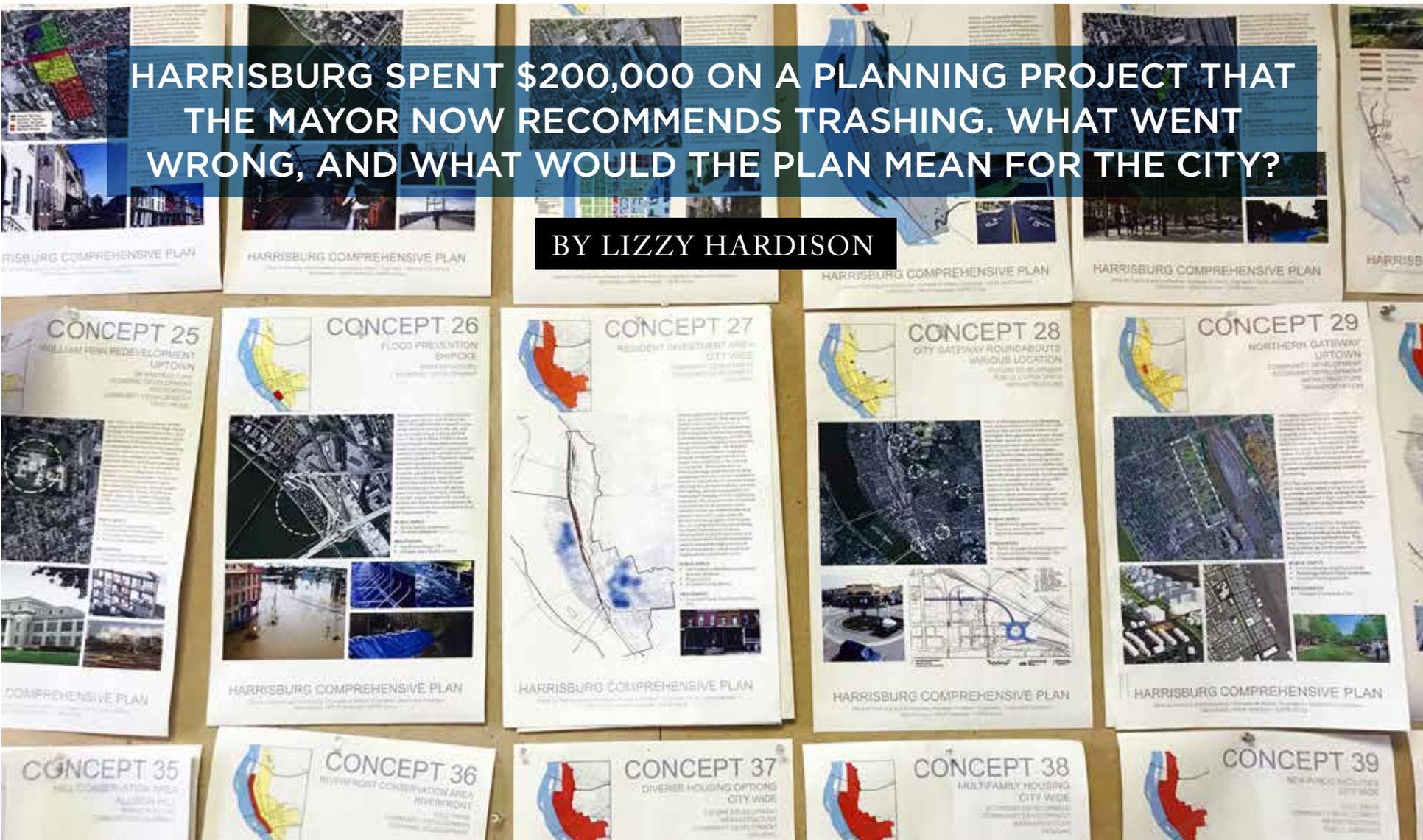




COMPREHENSIVE JAM

HARRISBURG SPENT \$200,000 ON A PLANNING PROJECT THAT THE MAYOR NOW RECOMMENDS TRASHING. WHAT WENT WRONG, AND WHAT WOULD THE PLAN MEAN FOR THE CITY?

BY LIZZY HARDISON



Print may be dead in the news industry, but it lives on in the offices of Bret Peters.

In a small suite of the Office of Planning and Architecture, Peters' design firm on Willow Street in downtown Harrisburg, every surface is covered in paper: spreadsheets, mockups and "idea slips," square cards on which Harrisburg residents wrote their desires for the city.

The print detritus shows what was left on the cutting room floor during the 18-month process of drafting a comprehensive plan for Harrisburg. That process recently culminated in the release of a 199-page draft document, which aims to articulate a shared vision of an historically factious and geographically fragmented city. The plan is part audit, offering an inventory of the city's material and economic resources, and part wish list, enumerating the actions that the city can take to improve its housing stock, traffic patterns, waterways, business development and more.

"It's an aspirational document," Peters said on a recent afternoon in the planning room.

He estimated that the cost of implementing the comprehensive plan in full would range in the billions of dollars. But he also claimed that the plan as a whole would pay for itself over time by raising the aggregate value of the city's real estate market, which would lead to more business development and higher tax revenue.

Many city officials, though, have another opinion of Peters' draft plan. They regard the plan and the process as so flawed that they vow to fight its approval, much less its implementation.

SOMETHING FOR THE CITY

Peters grew up in Lower Allen Township and lives today in Uptown Harrisburg. He founded OPA in 1999 and has taught design and architecture at Penn State and HACC. He also travels nationally for invited speaking engagements. In early November, he delivered a talk at Iowa State University School of Design titled "Corrupt Designs," where he described

"the challenges associated with comprehensive planning in a city well-known for economic and political difficulties," according to an event listing.

Peters has said that the great potential he sees in Harrisburg led him to prepare a last-minute bid for the comprehensive plan project, which was announced by the city in late 2014. He promised to assemble a team of expert consultants from across the country and was awarded the project in a unanimous vote by a 23-person steering committee.

That vote may have been the first and last harmonious moment in the comprehensive planning process. The next 24 months saw disputes between the city and Peters about Peters' alleged failure to pay subcontractors and meet deadlines, as well as ideological disagreements about policy proposals within the plan. The acrimony between Peters and city hall has reached such heights that the two parties don't even agree on Peters' employment status.

Mayor Eric Papenfuse and city Solicitor Neil Grover insist that Peters was fired after submitting

material behind deadline last year. Peters says he assiduously followed the terms of his contract. He claims he suspended the contract in 2016, after city administrators allegedly failed to provide timely feedback on drafts and asked him to change content.

After their communication dissolved in 2016, city administrators and Peters began preparing individual draft plans. In summer 2017, the six-member, volunteer Planning Commission invited both parties to present their material separately. The commission voted unanimously to adopt Peters' draft. He subsequently published it online at BeHbg.com.

As Peters began promoting the draft in public meetings and soliciting final feedback from residents, members of the city's administration have been publicly denouncing it.

"The Comprehensive Plan that you are seeing on a website, is not the city's plan," Jackie Parker, the city's director of Community and Economic Development, told members of the Harrisburg Parks Foundation in a Dec. 11 email. "It is a plan written by a consultant who has hijacked the process. It does not include what the public has indicated they would like to see."

Mayor Papenfuse also claims that Peters "hijacked" the planning process. He said in December that he will recommend that City Council vote to reject the plan.

"[Peters] clearly wanted to impose his vision onto Harrisburg without sufficiently incorporating public input," Papenfuse charged. "Now you have a fired architect putting forth a plan that the city had nothing to do with."

The mayor also alleged that Peters undertook the project as a way to extort money from the city.

But people outside of the city administration who have worked with Peters offer a somewhat different account. Tara Leo Auchey

led a community outreach effort with Peters for 10 months in 2015. Along with city planning director Geoff Knight, who declined to be interviewed for this story, the team gathered public input data to inform comprehensive plan proposals. Auchey said that Peters was reluctant to undertake the ambitious outreach agenda because of constraints on time and money and because he thought his professional expertise could guide the process. But Auchey said that he was receptive to the data as it came in.

"Bret's message was that we were all doing something for the city, and I truly believe he came from that place," she said.

Auchey did threaten to quit the project in October 2015 after a series of her paychecks were delayed. Though she questioned Peters' management skills, she did not think he pursued the project to extort money from the city, as Papenfuse alleged. Auchey has since been paid for her work in full.

Auchey also emphasized that Peters wasn't the only professional drafting the plan. A team of international consultants, with specialties from park design to housing policy, helped Peters analyze data and recommend planning strategies. Auchey thinks

that Peters' personality may have invited heightened scrutiny of his leadership abilities.

"Bret pontificates, he's very highbrow and thinks highly of himself," Auchey said. "But the biggest fault I see is in editing and time management."

For his part, Peters insists that OPA upheld its contractual obligations, assiduously managed its resources and acted with good intent towards the city. He believes that officials are trying to discredit his work because they object to some of his policy proposals.

In the chapter of his plan devoted to housing, Peters does not advocate for homeownership incentive programs, and he discourages the demolition of dilapidated properties. Both of those proposals, which are critical to Peters' strategy to raise home values and, subsequently, increase tax revenue and business development in the city, are in direct conflict with city initiatives.

Harrisburg's Department of Community and Economic Development has proposed its own comprehensive housing strategy that it hopes will bring homeownership in the city to 50 percent in the next decade. In December, City Council voted



in to double the Code Bureau's demolition budget for 2018.

Peters' comprehensive plan is currently published online for public input, and the Planning Commission will host a public hearing to discuss it on Jan. 10. After that, the commission can amend the draft and vote to send it to City Council. Council, in turn, will vote to adopt or reject Peters' draft as the city's new comprehensive plan. The decision could be vitally important for how Harrisburg develops in the next 20 years.

WHAT IS A COMP PLAN?

The last time Harrisburg undertook a comprehensive planning effort was in 1974, the same year that the Watergate investigation dominated the American news cycle. The city was recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Agnes, which, according to then-mayor Harold Swenson, dealt the city "a near fatal punch" two years earlier.

Flood waters from Agnes swirled into 6,000 Harrisburg homes and decimated at least 600 small businesses in June 1972. In his history of Harrisburg, "City Contented, City Discontented,"

journalist Paul Beers wrote that the storm wrought more than \$3 million in damage to city property and caused \$5 million in private property loss. By the time the waters receded, landmark buildings and entire neighborhoods had been wiped off the map. Mayor Swenson, along with his seven-member, Republican-controlled City Council, decided to undertake a full update to the city's master plan, which had last been updated in 1961.

"The urgency of setting the direction for the future has plainly never been more real," the 1974 plan begins. "The Harrisburg community is ready and willing to take the necessary hard look of self-reappraisal, to evaluate the future alternatives which face the City, and to determine to proceed by plan on a chosen course of action."

For all its ambition, the 1974 plan languished after its publication. Some of the objectives of that plan, such as the construction of a bridge on Division Street for pedestrians to access Wildwood Park, are still being considered by the city today. Harrisburg leaders did not commission another update until 2014, the first year of the Papenfuse administration.

In recent years, urban comprehensive plans have shifted from general guides on community objectives to strategic documents that focus on implementation and action, affirmed Tom Daniels, a professor at University of Pennsylvania School of Design. Daniels, who teaches urban comprehensive planning, called comprehensive plans a blueprint of where a city wants to see itself in 20 years, based on professional expertise and public input.

"The clear challenge of a comprehensive plan is how do you set priorities," Daniels said, noting

that planners often have to reconcile competing needs in housing, transportation, land use and economic development.

How they set those priorities depends on what the public wants to see.

"The art of it is blending the more professional planning side with the desires of residents," he said.

Peters' team collected public input during a 10-month community engagement campaign in 2015. The effort was led by Auchey and Knight with help from graduate interns at Peters' firm. Over the course of 10 months, the team held more than 100 meetings with residents and stakeholder groups, gathering input from hundreds of residents across the city. Peters then used that data to determine planning objectives and recommend actions to achieve them.

Peters' draft document is organized into eight chapters. Each one outlines broad goals, more specific "objectives" and action items to achieve them. In the housing chapter, for example, the objective "stabilize and preserve existing buildings" entails four action items, including the "identification and mapping of problem properties" and "establishment

of a troubled buildings initiative.” Each action comes with a detailed list of steps to realize it.

“We have followed an assiduously rational process based on math and fact,” Peters said. He added that, while analyzing the outreach findings, he found that public opinion perfectly aligned with trends and expertise in the professional design community.

In a conversation in early December, Papenfuse criticized Peters’ draft as too prescriptive and ideological. He reiterated the charge that Peters disregarded public input and imposed his own vision for Harrisburg’s future.

“The imperative language of this plan is unlike any other I’ve ever read,” Papenfuse said.

He added that he would have preferred broad objectives with a “panoply” of options for city officials to consider.

According to Daniels, however, the authors of comprehensive plans are supposed to be specific in their recommended objectives and actions.

“One of the things planners are supposed to do with help of the public is weigh alternatives,” Daniels said. “To have just an array of options is a little loose.”

Daniels also said that comprehensive plans should include cogent strategies for economic development and housing. Papenfuse had also objected to those chapters in Peters’ plan, claiming there was an argument over whether they should be included in the project at all.

A HOUSE DIVIDED

For all the discord surrounding the contents of Peters’ draft, city administrators agree with him on at least one point: the city needs to rehabilitate dilapidated buildings and hold absentee owners accountable for blight. The problem, however, is that Peters and city hall have radically different ideas for how to do that.

The long-held stance of the city Department of Community and Economic Development is that increasing homeownership in the city will improve neighborhoods. When someone buys a home, they make an economic investment in the property and the neighborhood around it. Conventional wisdom says they will work to maintain both.

Harrisburg’s Department of Community and Economic Development sent Peters its own draft of a comprehensive plan housing strategy in April 2016, which Papenfuse said they completed with help from a subcontractor. That document details the city’s goals to increase resident homeownership in the city to 50 percent within the next 10 years and incentivize the construction of new market-rate homes. Currently, 40 percent of Harrisburg residents are homeowners and 60 percent are renters.

Peters acknowledges that neighborhoods with a higher share of homeowners are safer and better maintained than those dominated by renters. But he also argues that, with a median income of \$34,000, Harrisburg’s population cannot sustain widespread homeownership. Even with the help of government subsidies and incentives to finance a house, Peters said, maintaining Harrisburg’s historical housing stock is expensive.

“Many people can’t afford to maintain the asset,” Peters said. “When someone is close to the edge on a payment program, one job loss or medical bill puts them into a foreclosure process in three months. Homeownership isn’t just the purchasing of a house.”

Peters said he didn’t prioritize home ownership in his own housing strategy because Harrisburg’s residents didn’t demand it. Only 14 percent of residents polled during the public outreach period said they wanted more incentives for home ownership. Sixty-five percent said their main housing concern was the rehabilitation of vacant properties. Peters thinks the city can mitigate blight by localizing property ownership, which doesn’t necessarily require owners to occupy their dwellings. In short, he wants Harrisburg residents to have myriad paths to build equity in their neighborhoods.

Peters details some of those paths in a concept he and his team developed in 2015. The concept proposes a “city wide investment area” that would expand property ownership opportunities for people who already live in the city. The resident-owner housing strategy might create favorable financing for a homeowner to buy and manage a neighboring rental property, or a tiered taxing structure where resident-owners would pay different rates than out-of-town landlords. Some of the methods he proposes elsewhere in the housing strategy, such as encouraging collective purchasing of property, also appear in the city’s DCED strategy.

The central goal of Peters’ housing strategy, he said, is to separate houses from the people who live in them. He envisions neighborhoods where rental properties are maintained to the same standard as owner-occupied properties, since the manager of the rental property may live down the street and see it every day. He also wants to incentivize trade education and apprenticeships so that the city has a robust corps of maintenance professionals. Harrisburg’s greatest material asset is its housing stock, he says, and it will become a more lucrative one if it receives proper care.

“The city is functionally a cultural landscape, and we have to treat it like a landscape we value, not a bunch of properties where we can make money off of trades,” he said.

Auchey and Vern McKissick, a local architect who serves on the Planning Commission, confirmed that Peters clashed with city officials on housing strategy proposals. Peters said that disagreements over housing precipitated the breakdown of cordial relations between his firm and the city. Papenfuse maintains that the project devolved after Peters submitted substandard work product and failed to complete the project by deadline.

UNSAVAGEABLE

In a public hearing last month on Harrisburg’s 2018 budget, Ausha Green, City Council’s newest member, pressed the city administration on its role in developing the comprehensive plan.

Green serves on the city Planning Commission and supported Peters’ draft over the city’s. She criticized the lack of clearly delineated responsibilities among

all the planning entities, but her main concern was how the Planning Commission would incorporate public feedback into Peters’ draft document.

“Once the Planning Commission decides what edits it wants to see, we will do those at your direction in-house,” Papenfuse said.

“You mean what edits the public wants to see,” Green shot back. She then called on the city to withdraw from the process. “I recommend someone from outside do it because some people from the public have the perception that the plan was hijacked by the administration.”

In an interview the next day, Green said that city administrators instructed the Planning Commission to edit and rewrite parts of the comprehensive plan draft in 2016 and 2017. The commission knew that the city Planning Bureau would contribute feedback to the draft materials they received from Peters, but Green said the commission did not think they would be so extensive.

“I didn’t expect the city would have such a hands-on role in the writing of the comprehensive plan,” Green said. “Some people might see them as overstepping their role, but that depends on what they thought their role was.”

Green acknowledged that Harrisburg had not commissioned a comprehensive plan in 40 years, which left scant precedent for how to assign roles and responsibilities. Robert Shoaff, a Midtown resident who is trained as an urban planner, offered a similar theory of the discordant planning process.

“We have 43 years of not doing this, so the residents and city don’t know the right interaction,” Shoaff said. “We have to build this back up.”

Members of the public are invited to comment on the draft plan online and discuss it at a public hearing on Jan. 10. After that, the Planning Commission and City Council will vote on whether or not to adopt the plan. Papenfuse is not sure whether he has veto power, but he has said he does not think the plan will be approved.

“It’s unsalvageable,” he said. “Unfortunately, we’ll have to start over at some point.”

He pointed out that the plan does not include any references to Harrisburg University, which earlier this year announced it will invest more than \$100 million in a 36-story building in downtown Harrisburg. He also said that some of Peters’ concepts, such as creating a southern gateway entrance for traffic entering Harrisburg from I-83, have already been considered and rejected by the city.

Green said she’s heard mixed reviews of the plan from constituents. But after almost two years of political and personal strife, she wants to let the public guide the planning process to its end.

“We’re going to continue to work through the process and are looking to have as much public input as possible,” Green said. “It’s a community issue at the end of the day.” **B**

To read the draft comprehensive plan, visit behhg.com. A public hearing on the plan is scheduled for Jan. 10.