

# Collington Know Your Neighbor

Jim Giese

## Managing Utopia

Thank you, Joan.

I am honored to be here tonight to tell you a little about me and my career in city management, especially since so many of you have so many singular achievements of your own that are worth telling.

Think of a community in Prince George's County planned as a model to provide a different housing opportunity to its residents. This community's site plan follows garden city concepts. There is a community center, a common gathering place for residents, with recreational and educational facilities including a swimming pool, library, eating places and an auditorium.

Adjacent to the community center are small-size apartments, while slightly further from the center are U-shaped clusters of row homes. Residents access their homes from adjacent parking areas on the interior side of the U and this is where deliveries are made and trash removed. The other side has access to gardens and common areas. Residents can walk to the community center or other homes on an interior sidewalk system. A ring road provides automobile access to the community. There is also a man-made lake, walking trails and

woodland along the community border.

Residents don't own their homes, but have contracts enabling them to stay in-place the rest of their lives, so long as they pay their monthly fees.

The community I describe sure sounds a lot like Collington, doesn't it? And it does share these common features with it, for the Collington planners followed many of the same concepts when it was built in 1988.

But the community of which I speak was built fifty years earlier a few miles north of here, the then new town of Greenbelt, Maryland.

As a part of the Franklin D. Roosevelt New Deal, the federal government built three model communities. These utopian garden cities are Green Hills, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati, Greendale, Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee and Greenbelt.

Government planning went beyond just the physical planning done at earlier planned communities by including social planning as well. Residents were carefully screened for income (not very high, not real low), race (only whites, this was still a time of separate but unequal), religion, (there were percentage allocations for Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Mormons based on census data), ability to properly care for their home and willingness to participate in

community affairs. Cooperative organizations and progressive education were also fostered. Even the town government was planned in advance of occupancy with a charter enacted that provided for a model council-manager form of government.

Twenty-five years later, I was fortunate and honored to become the city manager of Greenbelt, where I served for 28 years, long enough to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

How did I get there?

I was raised in Milwaukee, attending public schools. I lived on the north-east side, the opposite side of town from Greenbelt's sister city, Greendale, of which I only knew by name.

I first heard about model planned communities in eighth grade. My manual training teacher, enamored by this concept, had his students craft tiny model homes to place on a large board layout of a planned community with super-sized city blocks and interior walkways and play areas. But manual training was not my thing and my teacher's ideas went in one ear and mostly out the other.

Following high school, I attended Beloit College, a small liberal arts college south of Madison, Wisconsin. In an American government class I first learned about council-manager government and also that the University of Kansas offered a graduate program

to prepare students to become city managers.

Upon graduation, I served in the Army at Uncle Sam's invitation. There I learned more about the Kansas program from a fellow draftee who had attended KU. I applied to KU, was accepted, got discharged and off I went to Lawrence, Kansas.

Council-manager government is an achievement of the Progressive and Good Government Movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.. The intent is to run local governments in a business-like manner, free from corruption, bossism, cronyism and political machines. Instead, cities would employ professionally qualified managers with responsibilities much like those of corporate CEOs, Small-sized city councils would choose (and, if needed, fire) the manager, set policy and pass laws. The council would deal with the manager as a body, not as individuals. The manager, in turn, would oversee the operations of all, or most, city departments and appoint most personnel.

The first recognized council-manager government was Staunton, Virginia in 1908. By 1935 over 400 cities and seven counties had the plan. Now a majority of cities over 2,500 population have it and the number continues to grow. While most large cities prefer the mayor-council form of government, some prominent council-

manager cities are Phoenix, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Diego, Kansas City and Cincinnati. Some of the states with large numbers of council-manager local governments are Maine, Virginia, Texas and California.

In this plan, the council is responsible for employing a city manager based upon that person's experience and education and not due to partisanship or favoritism. In my career I never declared a political party affiliation. Nor did I ever get involved or take sides in any election.

The International City/County Management Association, or ICMA, is the professional association of city managers. Organized in 1914, it soon became international by the addition of Canadian city managers. Now with members from all over the world, ICMA is the premier and most respected professional association for local government. It has adopted a strong ethics code to which all members must subscribe. Its monthly newsletter is the go-to place for the listing of city and county management job opportunities.

The Kansas University City Management Training Program provided me a course of studies leading to a masters degree in public administration. KU has more graduate city managers in the field than any other university. The course consists of two-semester of

on-campus studies followed by a year-long internship in a council-manager city. Some on-campus courses I took were public works, municipal finance and personnel administration, municipal law, accounting, human relations and a case studies course that examined, in group discussions, actual operational issues experienced by local governments.

One case study, for example, was about a small enclave of homes in an unincorporated area just across the street from a city. Its residents had refused to be annexed to the city or pay a fee for fire protection service. One house caught on fire and city fire equipment responded to the city limit. Assured that there were no lives in danger and that the fire would not spread to property within the city, the firemen sat and watched the house burn. Was this response appropriate considering the circumstances? What could have been done to provide a better outcome?

We also took field trips to other cities to hear first-hand the experiences of their managers and to see their operations. One memorable trip was to Kansas City to meet with one of the most recognized managers of the time, L. P. Cookingham. He told of the continuing struggle to preserve the good-government movement in the city government, as it was constantly challenged by the

Pendergast political machine entrenched across the street in the county courthouse.

Every six weeks, the intern-class returned to campus for a four-day seminar and the on-campus class sat in. Here we heard the war stories and management problems of the various cities where they worked.

When my class returned to school to awe the on-campus class, most of us stayed at Lawrence's one hotel. There we had after-class bull sessions that extended far into the night; each of us with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. That training in social drinking was particularly useful to me on a later occasion, as you will hear.

I interned in the finance department of the City of Kenosha, Wisconsin, assigned the task of implementing a consultant developed machine accounting system and stayed for another year as the Assistant Finance Director, while also undertaking special assignments from the city manager.

Kenosha was an industrial city located on Lake Michigan south of Milwaukee with a population of about 50,000.

I then became assistant village manager of Western Springs, Illinois, an upper middle-class western Chicago suburb of about

10,000 on the main-line of the Burlington Railroad. During the nearly five years there, I supervised the financial operations, prepared the budget and for a while, after the manger left for a better job, served as acting manager.

When the village board and I could not agree on terms for my being appointed manager, I looked for another job. With a good employment market, I soon had several job opportunities. The one at Greenbelt interested me the most.

Until I applied, I knew nothing about Greenbelt. But once I learned of its history and came out for an interview and looked around, I became very interested.

But before I heard further from Greenbelt, I was offered another job, a good second choice. I needed to give an answer.

So I told Greenbelt's mayor of my situation and he said he'd get right back to me. He did, on a Thursday, announcing that he and another councilmember would fly out late Saturday evening to interview my Western Springs' references on Sunday. Would I make the necessary arrangements? I did and they came.

I met them at O'Hare airport. They immediately asked me to take them to the nearest bar to talk. I did, but it was almost midnight and Sunday blue laws required the bar to close. The mayor persuaded



the bar tender to sell a bottle of bourbon and off we went to their motel room. For the next 3-1/2 hours we sat on the motel room floor drinking bourbon and talking, a most unique interview. I knew then that Greenbelt would never be the stodgy and proper place Western Springs was.

At nine the next morning I took the pair to meet my references. They finished that afternoon and I met them for dinner. There I was offered the Greenbelt job with the caveat that I report to work in a week. I accepted and became Greenbelt city manager in mid-December, 1962.

The 10 years before I came to Greenbelt had been turbulent ones. By direction of Congress, the government sold Greenbelt in 1952. Large tracts of vacant land were sold to the highest bidders. Residents formed a cooperative and bought most of the government-built housing and a surrounding greenbelt on favorable financing terms. However, many residents did not want to have anything to do with a co-op, but also didn't want to leave their homes. The cooperative was forced to evict them.

The city and county governments, no longer receiving payments from the U.S. Government, had to levy taxes. Residents choked upon receiving their high tax bills and the city was forced to cut back

services.

In a highly-disputed action, the coop members, in order to reduce their tax burden, voted to sell their greenbelt to a private land developer, then later had second thoughts when they learned what was proposed to be built next to their homes.

The government did retain land that became right-of-ways for the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, built in the 50s and the Capital Beltway, under construction when I arrived. Once in the boondoggles, Greenbelt was now at a major crossroads in what was then the fastest growing county in America.

Then, as now, there were many active vocal residents in Greenbelt with strong opinions. They did not believe in consensus and enjoyed arguing over issues. The council was divided, as it often was.

However, I inherited the respect that had been earned by my predecessors and while the disputes continued, I was allowed to administer the city organization with very little interference.

Controlling development was the biggest issue facing the city then. Planning and zoning authority were vested in the county government, which was gung-ho for any kind of development. The city council wanted single-family homes built so that growing families could continue to live in the city. They wanted new

development to adhere to a town plan earlier adopted following original planning concepts. They wanted quality development.

The greenbelt sold by the co-op had been resold and became owned by a partnership that included Isadore Gudelsky, donor of the Collington property, Ted Lerner, now owner of the Washington Nationals Baseball Club and Charles Bressler, of whom you'll hear more later. They and two other development groups fought for approval to build a regional shopping mall.

They and others also sought to build garden or high-rise apartment complexes even though one giant apartment project, west of the original community, Springhill Lake, was already well underway. That project would have nearly 3,000 apartment units when completed.

Soon after I came, the county planning commission proposed a new master plan for development in Greenbelt calling for more massive apartment developments and an ultimate city population of some 75,000. It caused an uproar in the community of less than 10,000.

For many years, and even now, one development issue after another has riled the community, some resulting in law suits, others in outpourings of residents at public meetings. And gradually the

voices of the city and its citizens did come to be heard and developers would modify their plans to satisfy the city.

The 1960s and early 70s was also a troubled time for our nation and particularly turbulent in the Washington area, what with the John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy assassinations, the latter two resulting in rioting in Washington. There were also the peace protests against the Vietnam War that resulted in massive demonstrations at the nearby University of Maryland campus. Our police were called in for support and at one time the National Guard was encamped on city ballfields.

This was also the time of fair housing and equal opportunity and our once all-white city and its institutions became integrated, fortunately peacefully and without demonstrations.

Following the King assassination, the Southern Leadership Conference called for a Poor People's March on Washington where participants camped on the mall in what became known as Resurrection City. Two Greenbelt churches hosted lunch for the Northeast contingent of the march as it made its way to Washington. For a day, the city was overwhelmed with peaceful marchers, news reporters and undercover government agents, while police stood by out of sight. I could do a talk just about that day's events.

While never as great as what that first master plan proposed, growth did steadily occur. Condos and townhouses later became popular housing types to build, and the city council did successfully obtain some single-family construction. Our city tax base was greatly helped by the development of three major office parks as well as two shopping centers and we lowered the tax rate while bettering city services.

The city council decided to make every effort to restore the greenbelt sold by the cooperative and aggressively pursued grants and other funding to buy it back. In fact, grants to buy back those parcels cost the federal government more money than it received when it was first sold. Over 200 acres were bought by the city and our now parks and woodland..

While all this was going on and the city city government expanded to accommodate new residents and businesses, my task was to professionalize the city operations. In building a city organization, nothing proved to be a greater challenge than developing a professional police department.

When I arrived, the department was providing around the clock service with an authorized strength of only six men, but with two vacancies, one that of the chief. There were many events involving

officers, particularly in the early days, that caused me sleepless nights.

When I retired, the department had grown to nearly fifty trained uniform officers, many also having extensive specialized training. My last appointee as chief began his career as a recruit I had appointed to the department. He still heads it and the department has now received national accreditation. Chief Craze is currently serving as a vice-president of the International Association of Police Chiefs. The department is integrated both racially and sexually, although not to the extent it should be, and is free of the troubling incidents with citizens that it once had and many other departments face now.

As the city grew, I oversaw a dozen or so major construction projects, including a new police station, public works facility, recreation center, indoor swimming pool and a major park outfitted with ball fields, playgrounds and paths. The most challenging project for me was building a city-owned, 100-unit, Section 8 financed apartment house for the elderly. It was to be financed and operated without cost to city taxpayers. However, cost overruns threatened to leave the city stuck with a big bill. The worst overrun was extra foundation work required when a buried former dairy

farm manure pile was uncovered. Fortunately, all ended well.

Administratively, we brought our finance records, budget format and reporting to recognized national standards, formalized our personnel procedures, expanded our recreational programming to earn a national gold medal, established a planning department and created a unique youth-counseling program, utilizing volunteer professionals. We also upgraded and expanded our road system, providing much needed added parking in original Greenbelt (poor people weren't supposed to have cars) and supervised and regulated new street construction in new developments

As Greenbelt approached its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, residents became more aware of the city's unique origins and the need to preserve that heritage. At council's direction, I prepared an application that resulted in the original government-built housing and the remaining undeveloped greenbelt being listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Later Greenbelt was designated an historic National Landmark and a Planning Landmark. While we recognized Greenbelt's historic heritage, it was never our intent to prevent the city continuing to be a viable community able to adjust to the needs of modern times, as we felt that doing so would be in keeping with the intent of the original plan.

For its fiftieth anniversary, the city bought the perpetual lease to an original home and a citizens group formed to preserve and operate it as a house museum. With strong citizen and council support, the museum now operates with paid staff and volunteer docents and is about to expand.

As Greenbelt City Manager, I was able to proudly see the tangible results of the work performed, whether it was something that was built or refurbished, or something that was left untouched, or some service that benefited citizens. But no endeavor or success was that of mine alone. Each one was a team effort that included the city council, employees and to a very great extent the citizens of Greenbelt. I was proud to be a part of that team for 28 years.

To this point I have largely ignored the unique early history of Greenbelt as a New Deal project. I would like to finish my talk by telling you about it with the aid of some historic photos.