

Gary Greaves Oral History Interviews Digitization Project

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Elsie Crossman Interview

Interviewee: Elsie Crossman

Interviewer: Gary Greaves

Elsie: --in '85, I guess the zoning really changed in '86. And there were property owners that, there's something called vesting of a permit, came in, and established, applied for a permit and established what is called in Washington state, vesting rights. So that they can build their building under the law before it changed.

Gary: So a lot of them did that just before--

Elsie: A lot of them, there were actually the Columbia Center, is one. When the, actually there was an initiative passed by the boards and it capped. And at the time, the initiative was passed, but the concept of the city was allowing too much development under the new plan, well, only one building at that time was being built on that plan, all the other buildings were built under the previous plan, the previous zoning. Because there was a rush to vest, because they knew the law was going to change. And some developers felt that they would rather do it on the [? indistinct 01:19 ?] development. The marathon site was a project that had began way before that, and actually there was one where the arcade plaza is across from--

Gary: Sure, across the street--

Elsie: --and there were these blue towers that were going to be very close, and that project got a permit and eventually died. The city has a limit on how long a permit can be, before they didn't have it, by the time we got with the plan, the city passed amendments to the ordinance so that there would be a limit. I think that it's four years limitation. However, there are ways to make some improvements, you start digging in, and then you get a reprieve, but you cannot do that forever.

Gary: Is that what's been happening--

Elsie: In the marathon site, something, they were about to lose the permit. The city put a special provision in the code so that if a project had vested under the previous rule, and

they wanted to move, and use the new code, the city will, they can come and do that, and then they will vest under the new rule. So basically, will extend the life of the permit.

Gary: And that's what's happened with them?

Elsie: That's what's happening with that, although I hear rumblings now that the developer is about to say, [? indistinct 02:44 ?].

Gary: Things aren't getting any better--

Elsie: He's trying, what I heard, rumor is that he's trying to sell the site.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: That's all I know. But I think there was a rush to build under the old code at the same time people were trying to catch the market, so they were not, but all of a sudden the market dried up. And they could not get financing for the plans, even if they had a permit approved, they couldn't do the financing.

Gary: Things really are changing for them to go ahead and...

Elsie: No, no, I mean if you don't have money, you don't have money. It doesn't, and then the permit eventually will die.

Gary: So, I see on the sign there then there's something about a park or is that what--

Elsie: Right, that's the new, under the new provisions, the city has something called the public benefit features. So if you can, and the city allows an incentive, you will get more development rights if you develop a public park. That's an amenity. But the city did something special so that the project would still get the volume that they were allowing--

Gary: Sixty stories--

Elsie: Yeah which is...right now, nobody can build that high.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: So the city council really was trying to provide an incentive for that site, to build the park. I think the issue is that it's a key location, it's across from the museum, it's right on the transit...

Gary: Would it be hard to build a sixty story building over the tunnel like that? I mean, wouldn't you have to go down?

Elsie: It's just engineering. I mean, it's just money...The moment I learned, I went to architectural school, and we had to deal with building, we had to learn mechanics and

all of that. And there was an engineering professor that said, if you can build, if you can get a ship, you know like a cruise liner, or a worse yet, a thing, like a ship that holds planes..

Gary: A hangar?

Elsie: The hangar. On the water, you can build anything on land. It's just a question of doing it, going deep enough or spending enough money. There are things that are unbuildable because they're just prohibitively expensive.

Gary: Seems like it would be hard to build right over the tunnel...

Elsie: It's not easy. And remember when they built the tunnel for the transit tunnel, at one point they hit water. They cannot go very deep in downtown without hitting water.

Gary: Right? Right?

Elsie: It's when you're so close to the water, a lot of first avenue is fill. So I don't know the details. I think the main problem right now for that developer is that there's no money for him to finance the--

Gary: So like that entrance, to the, you know, the bus tunnel, rusted out, you know, it almost looks like a sculpture now, but I mean it's a, that just came to be because it was just kind of caught in the middle of--

Elsie: No, no, the city from the beginning said that we needed a tunnel entrance there. So what metro did, they did a temporary entrance so that there will be access for pedestrians. We always expected that that entrance would be built into a building, whatever, whatever it does. The zoning code gives, is another, what we call a bonus. If the person builds that entrance and creates a lot of public amenities in there, then they get recognition on their expanse of what they're doing and the city allows them more development rights on that site. So the idea of having the park included in the entrance to the station will give whomever owns that side more development rights.

Gary: And looking to the block to the north of it, and that's just slowly been going vacant over the past, to where I think there's really like seven buildings and two parking lots there. And now there's one occupied building left and that's only just a little bit of it, but I mean is that typical of a lot of blocks that you've watched that they just slowly go downhill and--

Elsie: Well, I think many of these were sites where there was going to be a major development there, and that's, the only thing is I am not completely positive of which project went where. I know the marathon site was in there. There was another one on Pike and 3rd, kitty corner from the [? indistinct 07:41 ?] where a developer was going to build, they were going to have a housing and the Act Theater, and an office building. And they were just about to get it down to start, but then they lost the financing.

Gary: Oh yeah, that's the [? indistinct 07:57 ?]. Because Act was in there just a little while.

Elsie: Right, and that's the issue, the moment, many of the, well, most of the leases downtown are long-term leases, at least five years. Some maybe even ten years.

Gary: Some people are still--

Elsie: When the developers know they're going to be, they're going to tear down the structures, then whenever the leases come up, they will not renew it in the long-term. Some tenants will stay on the short term and some others may decide, I'd better move because I need another long-term lease.

Gary: So what kind of process could I go through to kind of get the status block by block of any of those projects? That one called for a thirty four story office building--

Elsie: Right, that one needed, because it's, it will go through a process, they apply for a permit, depending on what they want to do the city will...for downtown projects, if they want to use some of the bonus features, then there is some review and some discretion. If it's an office building, then, that has more than 80,000 square feet, then they have to go through what's called the [? indistinct 09:12 ?] because the city has to allocate a million square feet a year. So there is sort of a competition. Not by a competition, but the city will review plans and figure out which building, if there is more demand than the million square feet, then they will allocate the space to the better projects. So far, because when caps passed, the economy went down and then there was not enough demand for buildings. But the city has, actually, a surplus of square footage--

Gary: Are there any projects, like that are going to start up, though, that have--

Elsie: I don't, I don't really know, because the vacancy rate is still in the 15% is what I have heard. It's been fluctuating between 13 and 18.

Gary: What would be a good office, though, to check?

Elsie: To check what?

Gary: Kind of the status of--

Elsie: It would be the Land Use Division. A person that might be...Vince Lyons will be the person I suggest you talk to. If he doesn't know, he will probably be able to tell you the right person in terms of giving you the status of the permits. In terms of financing, I'm not sure he'll know any more. Those are basically, private conversations that the developers and the owners have themselves and the banks.

Gary: Yeah--

Elsie: Actually, there, you know [? Sieg ?] has several permits that he had for buildings that are not being built. He had a couple around here that we don't see, where the Seattle...the arcade? Next door, the next block, next door to the city's credit union. He had the, what is called the...what is it, it used to be called...there was a bank in there...

Gary: Seattle Trust?

Elsie: The Seattle Trust Corp. And the rest of the--

Gary: That's right, he was--

Elsie: And the rest of the block facing second, that's all supposed to be in building. He got a permit on the cap about...the permit was issued about two years ago, I think.

Gary: So who knows what may have happened--

Elsie: Who knows what's going to happen with that, he may run out of time. Or he may start something before the permit expires. He has--

Gary: It would be kind of nice for that to stay.

Elsie: The Seattle Trust Park?

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: Yeah. Actually, he was keeping the park. That was built in to, because there was a lot of community concern with tearing down, so he's keeping that and building in, and then there's a brand new building, he's keeping the facade of the buildings on second. Those two buildings are historic landmarks, he's keeping just the facade.

Gary: I've been kinda working on this project for six months, and one of the gaps that I have is kind of in-between the past few years and...are you familiar with what happened with the Department of Community Development--

Elsie: Yeah.

Gary: Like after Uhlman's term and into Royer's, but I mean, what happened to it there, kind of...

Elsie: Ok...I don't...my understanding is towards the end of Uhlman's term, you know he was mayor for twenty years or something?

Gary: No, no for two terms.

Elsie: No? Only two terms?

Gary: Eight, it was eight years. He was '70...no, actually, '69 to '77.

Elsie: To '77, ok. At the end of his term, he created the office of policy planning.

Gary: Right.

Elsie: And he basically, I think he created that because he felt that he couldn't manage the city departments. That's what I've been told, I've never read that on paper. The city of Seattle, for a city of its size, has an incredible number of departments. There were like, 27, between departments and offices.

Gary: A lot of those were created under him.

Elsie: Yeah. Sometimes whether he created or the council created, he had to live with them. Some of the departments are very big, some of the departments are very small, and particularly the bigger the department, the more independent they seem to be. And the mayor felt that he needed to, also there was a lot of federal money, you know in the '70s, the, from the Johnson years, by the '70s there was a lot. And I think under the Nixon years in '72, he tried to de-centralize a lot. So I'm sure there was more local initiatives or something. Anyways, my understanding, there was a lot of money and all the [? indistinct 14:28 ?] money...

Gary: Was revenue sharing.

Elsie: Revenue sharing and all that. So I think the office of policy planning, you know the way it was going to, many of the federal, many of those funding sources required some overall planning structure to be able to do it, or a plan to be able to get those monies. And many of the departments that were pretty much operational had a difficulty developing a plan, and I think that's where he created this office of policy planning that developed some of those general plans to be able to use the funds--

Gary: Why do you think like the department of community development couldn't do that, or why wasn't that--

Elsie: The department of community development was really entrenched in local community issues. They were still--

Gary: What political--

Elsie: Yeah, and there were really, you know, because I think community development used to be the human, had human, actually under Uhlman there was a big division on human services. And it was really a local thing. And they had done, they were planning the [? indistinct 15:34 ?] city, what is it, the city...model cities program?

Gary: Uh-huh

Elsie: And from there they moved into forward trust funds. Remember, forward trust was passed earlier in the '70s.

Gary: Sure.

Elsie: And they had a lot of the money, and they had to do these plans to distribute the money. So they were dealing with geography more than anything else, and the local community was very politicized. So for those other general monies, they needed more functional plans, something broadening policy planning, more than strategic planning, and then this office was created. That office had a lot of control of money, and they worked very closely with the budget department, the budget office.

Gary: Right.

Elsie: I think eventually, I mean, they, the staff, the mayor, and the council, on the [? indistinct 16:25 ?] issue, so this office ended up helping the mayor manage the departments.

Gary: Right, the OPP [Office of Policy Planning].

Elsie: The OPP [Office of Policy Planning]. And I think they were, they were forcing departments to provide information to the mayor and the council that previously they were not dealing with.

Gary: Was the other thing that happened, that made the Department of Community Development less important was because they weren't those federal funds, I mean model city stopped, and all those things--

Elsie: That stopped, and there were, and then, so whenever there was a new initiative, I think the mayor's office began leaving it in the Office of Policy Planning rather than the community development.

Gary: So it just kind of almost died in action--

Elsie: It almost died, I think they had not delivered, as well. They were supposed to be working on the downtown plan for ten years, they never got a first draft. That's, I mean, I always thought it was the city, but that's what I heard. And the neighborhood, what it was called, the NIH. These neighborhood plans to block rent, and they completed something [? indistinct 17:46 ?] but then they blamed the city because it was never implemented. To some extent, they were done in a way that they were not meant to be implemented.

Gary: Implementable.

Elsie: Right. And I think, you know, the council and the mayor kept hearing about it. So I think DCD [Department of Community Development], the human service part was taken out, and they went to the human, there was an office of human services, or eventually became a department. So, my understanding is, little by little, that office was the last director was Paul Schell. And he ran for office, the moment he left. I think, during that tenure of Paul Schell, the DCD [Department of Community Development] lost control to the office of planning. The policy planning. And then when he leaving, because when he ran for office, he was kind of the end--after that, the department, within 12 years, may have had six new directors, or at least four. After Schell left, I know there were three or four that came and went. And the staff was really, it went from bad to worse it seemed, it was adrift for quite a while.

Gary: So that was even going into the rare time when--

Elsie: Yeah. Well, actually--

Gary: --and just decided to abolish it then?

Elsie: The funny thing was, that Charlie Royer, ran criticizing the office of policy planning. He--

Gary: [? indistinct 19:23 ?]

Elsie: Huh? Paul Schell was the insider, and he criticized Paul Schell, I think maybe Paul Schell helped create the office of policy planning. I don't really know that much about that. But Charlie ran against the office of policy planning. So when he won the election, everybody thought that he would get rid of it. And eventually within 6 months, he learned to appreciate that staff, I was hired, actually I came within that first year. It was the King County--at that point, he had to appoint a new director, and that's when his problem with the council began, because his recommended candidate was rejected by the council.

Gary: Who was that?

Elsie: It was Carol Lewis I think, who was a member of his staff.

Gary: Yeah...

Elsie: And I think the council rejected it because he was, she was a special assistant to the mayor's office, and she was quite young. And I think the council did not like having someone from the, you know, from the mayor's office staffing an office.

Gary: She was working at the TV station before--

Elsie: Yeah, but she had come to the city as part of his staff. And anyway, so at that point, the person that became very critical of the policy planning office was Jeannette

Williams, who had been in the council for quite a while. And she became almost a crusade against that office. And within the first year of Charlie's term, the council already changed it and it became the office of policy and operation. And they cut a bunch of positions, they cut like from 90 positions to 60. And they wanted [? indistinct 21:15 ?] defined the office a little bit more, but it took another four years until eventually they said, no, they changed again, and eventually they took it all apart. The [? indistinct 21:27 ?] was sent to the office of management and budget. The council grabbed about ten positions and sent them to central staff. And then some of the, see, there were people doing planning for energy, water, I mean, for utilities, economic development, and what they did is, they sent the positions to the line departments. There was a unit on transportation planning, that was sent to engineering. That was so the pet peeve that Jeannette Williams had, because, this transportation planning office was really trying to sort of change the way engineering did business, because engineering would only deal with traffic flow, and people kept saying, there's more to transportation than traffic flow.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: Anyway, so that's what I know of. But DCD [Department of Community Development] kept limping along until, actually about the end of the Royer years, there were two more re-organizations.

Gary: Oh, so it was still around at the end of his term?

Elsie: Yeah, the [? indistinct 22:39 ?] was still around, [David Mosely] was the last, no he was not the last...he was the last director under Royer. But David left shortly after Norm was elected. And then Norm appointed a new director. And then the department was eliminated, within a year or two.

Gary: So into Rice's term?

Elsie: Into Rice's term, it was Norm, in Norm's re-organization, this stuff was coming through--

Gary: Why do you think it was allowed to limp along, I guess because there were some things it was still doing that needed to be done?

Elsie: Yeah, I think there were a couple of things they were still doing, and I think...the community continued to, I think, the community...that department had areas that had worked very closely with communities, and there was a lot of community loyalty in some areas. And it was kind of a love and hate relationship. And the council, or the mayor, cut and put it off early on. A big issue was that they did a lot of neighborhood support, they did a lot. Actually, it was James Street, prior to Royer finishing his term, created an office of neighborhoods.

Gary: Right, right.

Elsie: And in a way, by doing that, he helped, eventually, I think it was Charlie, turned it into a department. Eventually it was turned into a department. I--maybe it was just created as a department. And that really helped, that took another big piece out of DCD [Department of Community Development]. Because all of a sudden people started identifying in the community with the department of neighborhoods--

Gary: One of the final nails in the coffin.

Elsie: --And that really nailed DCD [Department of Community Development], because there was not much left. The planning, they were not really doing planning, the planning was, the physical planning was left in what is called the land--out of OPP [Office of Policy Planning], the only thing remaining on its own was something called the land use and transportation project. We were, I was part of that office, which were in charge of developing all the policies that will guide, what was, in effect, the comprehensive plan. And the idea was, that after that office, after that job was done, we were going to live happily ever after, and that office would disappear. Before that happened, all of a sudden,

[? indistinct 25:17 ?] who was going to take care of this thing? And that's when there was a new, the last re-organization said, well we really need to figure out how we're going to do this. And that's when the office of neighborhoods was created. The land use and transportation project was changing to the office of LOP, long range planning. And then an office of human services was created.

Gary: So when did DCLU [Design, Construction and Land Use] come into being?

Elsie: DCLU came to be about...ok, that was another nail in DCD's [Department of Community Development] coffin. I think that happened in about '86 or '88. I don't remember. DCD [Department of Community Development], DCLU [Design, Construction and Land Use] was the building department. And they issue all the building permits, and they did, when the environmental policy act was adopted, for some reason, what is called SEPA [State Environmental Policy Act], the building department did SEPA [State Environmental Policy Act]. So there was a unit that did the analysis and environmental review. At the same time, DCD [Department of Community Development] had a department, and they had, and the building department had its own in unit, a check for zoning of plans and issued permits. At the same time, DCD [Department of Community Development] did shoreline permits and did all the discretionary decisions. Somebody wanted a re-zoning for [? indistinct 26:46 ?], as well as the special districts like the market, were their positions. DCD [Department of Community Development] did it. By the time, in '86, while we were changing the land use policies, and we changed the zoning, people felt that we needed to look at how we issue permits, and there was something called the land use reform in the city. And they looked at our permitting process. People were complaining that it took six months to get a permit.

Gary: So in a way DCD [Department of Community Development] really wasn't a, wasn't well-suited to doing that zoning variances and things like that?

Elsie: Well, what we had is, see, the building department dealt with zoning, and dealt with SEPA [State Environmental Policy Act], and then also with the technical codes, then there is also the fire department and the health department that have to do with permits. And the engineering department also has to do with some of this. And then DCD [Department of Community Development] was separate, doing all the discretionary decisions. And developers and neighborhoods were complaining that there were too many, the hydra had too many heads. And the idea of the master use permit, a one stop thing, began to surface. So there was a group internal to the city with some community members sitting in that went through an analysis of how we issue the permits, and how this thing should be organized. Well, the end result of that is, the building department became the department of constructional [? indistinct 28:18 ?]. And that section that DCD [Department of Community Development] had on shorelines and variances and stuff came to the building department, and that's--the only thing that was left in DCD [Department of Community Development] is what is called the special districts, the landmarks board. And the ID [International District], Pioneer Square. And that was a small unit. So that's what's left of DCD [Department of Community Development], so they lost another big piece.

Gary: Why do you think it took so long, and maybe it's not at a perfect point now, but why did it take so long to kind of get it organized and get, you know, like DCD [Department of Community Development] had such a slow death, and there was always, like you said, it had too many heads, and I mean, why was that? Was that maybe a little neglect of maybe the Royer administration to really, or interest by them to really kind of tackle that re-organization, or what...

Elsie: It's, you know, re-shuffling the bureaucracy is such a [? indistinct 29:23 ?]. I mean, who gets elected? By streamlining the bureaucracy? Not many people, I mean, the people out in the streets don't get a whole lot of connection with that. Saying we're going to streamline the permitting process gets attention. But, you know, what happened with DCD [Department of Community Development] or not, that is, it's such an internal thing, and I think it's, the mayors have a whole lot more things to deal with, and it's on the council as well that they really, they give low priority to those things. It's--

Gary: Is that why, maybe DCD [Department of Community Development] didn't do anything to the comprehensive plan for ten years, it just sat around, because who really had, who would have been the unit to prod DCD to do these things, would it have been the mayor's office, or would it have been the city council?

Elsie: The city council. I think in a way, it wasn't that DCD [Department of Community Development] was not doing anything, it wasn't like people were, you know, having coffee all day long, as much as the projects were given too many other priorities, and you know, you are always start doing fire drills and that thing gets done, and the other stuff doesn't get done. But eventually, you get, the results come through, you did not do it, why. And at that point you say, well I was doing this other stuff. But many of that stuff is loose stuff, it's fire drills that either the council or the mayor had--

Gary: You know if you look, go back to the comprehensive plan when they first drew it up in 1947, I mean that's kind of been the history of--

Elsie: Of planning!

Gary: In other words, the whole time they've had these plans, and it finally took ten years to adopt it, but all they did was adopt it, as far acting on it, you know [? indistinct 31:17 ?] but they haven't you know, but discarded. It just seems that over the, over time, that's just kind of the nature of planning. To plan but not do anything.

Elsie: In '81 when we developed, the council set a different process in '67 it was the last amendment to the comprehensive plan. And then, by the '70s, because of the Boeing bust, the city went through an examination of where are we today. The city had lost, was losing population to the suburbs and all that. And they went through a process called the Seattle two-thousand goals. And setting, that was a mammoth project. At that, when they did that, OPP [Office of Policy Planning] was the one that took the lead, although many of the departments were involved. But it was OPP [Office of Policy Planning], I think it must have been that the public and the council and the mayor felt that they really needed to have somebody fresh, new blood, to work with the community in doing that, although, my understanding is that the departments participated very well in supporting this. But it was OPP that led that effort.

Gary: Isn't it true that even recently, within the last, even right now, that they're just beginning to act on some of those Seattle two-thousand--

Elsie: Well no--

Gary: That's what John Miller suggested to me, that--

Elsie: And he doesn't know what he's talking about. I mean the city, Seattle did accomplish something that very few cities have done. Seattle changed the entire zoning code and amended the entire zoning map for the city. We have not totally completed it, but is left is very small piece. Now the, so the issue was, the council said I do not want to go back and to the 1967 comprehensive plan and just put a bunch of roadways on a map.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: We want people to participate and develop detailed policies so that we have good policies to guide what we do in our zoning decisions. They set up a very unreasonable schedule, they said they were going to get it all done in two years, and that every year they were going to re-evaluate it. And they separated it into phases. But we were going to do this, all these phases in two years. So we're going to do policies for residential areas, neighborhood, commercial, industrial, downtown, and open space. And they said, you know, four months for each one. Well, when they did the single family policies, which was the first piece, they were adopted in 1979, they were for--no. '70....yeah, they

were adopted in '79. They had, the staff had worked for about two years to get it done. And they were not implemented until we did the multi-family piece, that took another two years. Well, that's the piece that has taken ten years, John Miller signed the single family policy, that's the only piece he worked on. And when he left, they had not implemented. When we came and took, they set up this formula that said, these areas are going to be single family. We had to go out and figure out the map, the map required [? indistinct 34:38 ?] acres of land.

Gary: Oh, wow.

Elsie: And we did that as part of the multi-family piece, because at that point, we had to figure out what was single family, what was multi-family. And that process is the one that took ten years because we had to develop the policies, with a lot of public participation, and we had to do a draft, then we had to do a final, we had to have public meetings, we had to do environmental impact statements. And at the same time, we developed the policies, we were developing regulations. And the policies are quite detailed. But eventually we changed the zoning for the whole downtown, I mean how many cities have been able to do that? I mean, at the time, we were doing that, LA, the city of LA had done a new plan. And they came with a brand new zoning, and the council didn't adopt it. Actually, eventually, ten years later, they had to adopt it on a court order. Some communities complained and said, they adopted the plan ten--and we don't have zoning and LA, they went to court and the court ordered them, you have two years to do the zoning. So the problem was in 1986, we sent what it was to be the last element, which was the open space element. And it went to council, and frankly the city council was totally divided. And Jeannette Williams took it apart and said, well I want to do this, and that piece, and the council really struggled. It was a turf issue, because the open space dealt with boulevards, dealt with parks, and dealt with some land use issues. Plus green belts, another time we were through a major thing on green belts. And when the council, because we had a court, the green belt regulations were appealed to court, and the court order was to get rid of some of it. So that created a problem, and that's what stalled the process.

Gary: So what was, what do you think was Jeaneatte Williams, specific--

Elsie: Jeanette Williams really wanted to get the green belts. She was very much a green belt advocate. But at that point, when the court order came, we said, we probably should stop discussing this item.

Gary: So that's when it got broken up?

Elsie: That's when it got broken, it got stole, and she, at that time, was the head of the parks committee. But she really wanted to deal with the green belt issue, which is a land use issue.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: And the executive felt that should not be dealt at the parks, at the parks committee. So that was help. So the council adopted some policies, and we still have some of the parks, and some of the public schools under what is called the old zoning code because we have to change the zoning--

Gary: Parks and public schools, but all of downtown pretty much--

Elsie: Oh, it's done.

Gary: --[? indistinct 37:46 ?]

Elsie: Yeah, so we, right now we have to get rid of what we call title 24, which are just a few parcels, there are many 60 to 100 parcels. And most of them are public schools or...

Gary: So, having done that, what do you think that that re-zoning accomplished, and I mean, kind of tangibly.

Elsie: Well, I think, one, it did bring the zoning more consistent with sort of what the community values were now. We have, the previous zoning code was a very arcane, old code.

Gary: Early '50s or so.

Elsie: It was a remnant, some of this stuff came from the '30s, and it was just being patched up and amended, it was not very user friendly. We began with a concept of a more user friendly code, at this point is probably just too big to be user friendly. But I think, so the main thing was that one, we set those new policies and we had to bring them up to...so it was more contemporary with what Seattleites wanted to see in their code. And there is an army of people that worked very closely with the city and with the council and what was adopted and not, as usual there are glitches and at this point, it's complicated but I think we move away from the old code that had been basically imported from other places, probably from New York, and here it's more a homemade product, for better or for worse.

Gary: So like what would be one example of, you know, kind of a basic change, you know, from back then, you know, to more in the present?

Elsie: Well, for instance, in the single family, when they did the single family, the regulations before, it was said like the land was vacant. Everybody's building a house is going to do something that fits a piece of vacant land. When they did the policy, said look, we need a special provision for remodeling because our housing, single family areas, are basically built, and what we tried to do more in-fill, as well as a lot of remodeling, so why don't we make it easier, the life of people who want to remodel and bring this in their houses. Many of the houses were built in substandard lots, and they don't have, the many month setback is five feet. Well, many of these houses are three foot from the property line. So if you're already there, let them go up to three feet. Deal

with the fire code, you know, if they have a window that's too close, they have to put a wire glass. But so that was one thing. So they look at what is that we need, and then when we need to name new commercial policies, the zoning before you had categories of zoning, but then you had one high limit for each zone, and what happened is, throughout Seattle heights, is a very sensitive issue here. Because of the hills and stuff. In the old zoning, which is very standard, if you have the less intensive zones have lower heights, the more intensive zones have higher heights, well in neighborhood commercial areas, the intensity of the use is different than, you know the height, which has to do more with density. So we separated the height from the intensity of the use. So you have five zones for intensity of the use, but the height can be, is separate. So you sort of can mix and match. That was something pretty much [? indistinct 41:44 ?]. In the downtown, we ended up with specific zones for downtown, before we had zones that applied downtown and outside downtown. So I think that was something that came through the public, you know, the public comment process.

Gary: So, I'm unclear, who initiated that process to re-zone at all, was that OPP [Office of Policy Planning], or was that a political decision, or how did that, was that just something that--

Elsie: I think it began with the Boeing bust in '68, '69. And--

Gary: So it was just kind of looking at--

Elsie: It's looking at--

Gary: --where we were at--

Elsie: --they had done an amendment to the comprehensive plan in 1967, and I think by the time '69 came along, and said, well this thing isn't going to do anything for us. It seems to me--

Gary: Twenty years to get to that point--

Elsie: Must have been a waste of time. And I think there was this group called the Seattle 2000 Commission, which was a huge group, and the city bureaucracy was very much involved in the community--

Gary: So it kind of came out of that.

Elsie: Yeah. And to that process, there was a strong recommendation that we need to change our comprehensive plan, and we need to change our zoning codes. So that recommendation came forth and the council agreed, that was one of the major recommendations in it, so the city hired consultants that, to evaluate the zoning code. And this, the consultant team made a report to the council and said, your code stinks. And they found inconsistencies, they were difficult due to the fact that it was standardized, that we needed to create something more, than can tailor better to the

different situations, you know, those codes that came from New York or Chicago, and they're flat cities, first you come to Seattle. So that really was the Seattle 2000 and frankly, at that time, we had a very progressive council, I think. That's what John Miller was part of it before he left. Chatman was part of that Phyllis Lamphere, and I think they made, and Uhlman, they made a commitment to make, to go through that effort.

Gary: Yeah, and in a way--

Elsie: And the city stuck to it, frankly, which is unusual. It stuck for too long maybe, but we stuck to it. We had to get it done.

Gary: And I don't know if this is a fair characterization, but it's one that I give it, I think that there's kind of a laziness about planning, for a long time to not really take on something like this, it's a lot easier to do something standardized, and spend all your time on a library or something that, you know, politically needs to be done for one council member or another, to just to really get down and work with the nuts and bolts and make them work.

Elsie: I think for [? indistinct 44:54 ?] frankly, probably was also a major element that it really show, because it was the public that voted and said we want these things done.

Gary: There was money there and that money needed to be spent--

Elsie: There was money there and it has to be spent, we need to plan to be able to do it. And I think that probably brought to the council, the community really wants us to do these things.

Gary: Whereas, the way it had always been done was that the departments, or the city decided, decided for the city what was going to be purchased--

Elsie: Right and it seems to me it was the public spoke, you know, the citizens spoke on that forward thrust. Yeah.

Gary: If you look at it really broadly, when you look at planning, comprehensive planning, with comprehensive plans, [? indistinct 45:50 ?] plan, the comprehensive plan, there's a lot of similarities in the '57 plan, which then, you know, the '67, but then also, the present plan there are some similarities. In other words, there's kind of the basic, maybe it was established just because that's where their materials were established back then. And so those, there's kind of that same foundation, and it works off of that, and the densities, and everything else, as long as similarities, what do you think are the really big difference--

[Tape cuts off]

Elsie: --we develop all the elements for it.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: And before, we do not have a requirement, we always began with a very ambitious plan, and eventually you end up...

Gary: Just doing a little--

Elsie: Doing less. We completed, you know, the land use pieces we completed at the downtown, we did a more comprehensive study. But we're supposed to do a transportation element, and economic development, etcetera, etcetera. And the council went and modified and changed that. Now we have, the difference is that we have a mall, a law that says you have to do all these pieces. And they have to be interrelated to each other. I think in terms of the physical guidance, or the planning scheming, Seattle is a built city, and what we're doing is, to some extent we're working on the margin in the sense, that at the same time we're trying to make a bold statement. We're saying we're going to manage what we have, hopefully for the better. And the idea of concentration is not necessarily new, because the city, that is the pattern that we have. Seattle is mostly single family neighborhoods, with a concentration, and what the plan is proposing is to enhance the areas where the concentration already exists. So I would say that it's not new in that way, what it's doing is trying to accentuate the positive, and hopefully provide the amenities so that we can achieve a better concentration. And where we're trying, so the major thing is all of a sudden we have a law that says, if you're going to have, you have to have a transportation element, you have to have a housing element, you have to have a public facilities element, and in addition to a land use element. And in the last time, I think the city wanted to do that, when they began with Seattle 2000, the idea was that we have all these pieces. But since we do not have a law that forces us to do it, eventually that plan changes over time, and many of the pieces were done in a very watered down version, or they were not done at all.

Gary: Did that, that's really made you incredibly busy in this department--

Elsie: Oh god. In addition to that, the law says you have to get it done by July of 1994, which, you know it can take ten years to get, you know, some of these studies done. I feel that it is good that we have a deadline.

Gary: Yeah.

Elsie: Because you're never going to do it perfectly well, but it's important to do it for the first time, and then continue to improve. You never finish with a plan, a plan is always a work in progress.

Gary: And do you think that another one of the aims of this plan is to make it easier for things to get implemented, and to happen or is--

Elsie: Right.

Gary: And does the law help or does it hinder that way, I mean, in a way, you're having to put all your energy just into meeting its--

Elsie: Its requirements.

Gary: But is that useful too, I mean, is there some, is there good logic, is some of it's good logic behind it?

Elsie: I think some of it is good logic, the practicality of it is where it becomes difficult. On the other hand, the only way to get it done is to do it once, and then figure out how to improve it. I think, you can argue that you need five more years to really do it well, but in the meantime, life keeps going on, and I think by losing time, you're doing worse than by not starting something, putting something in place. Four years, I mean, the law passed in 1990. And it will be four, you know, three and a half years by the time we're supposed to get it adopted. And one can argue that for a city like Seattle, that's not enough time to do a plan. I feel that because we have done that other process, the ten years prior to that, that we are somewhat more ready to do it.

Gary: I don't want to run too much into your lunch here, just one more thing, kind of in that Royer, Rice, kind of transition, did the Rice administration kind of pick up the ball and really move with things, or was it really the [? indistinct 51:12 ?] Management Act that kind of forced things to happen, I mean, when the Rice administration came in what did they do?

Elsie: No, actually before Charlie left, after the cap initiative passed, we had revised already the major institutional policies, because there was a [? indistinct 51:36 ?] court decision that we needed to make some changes to major institutions, that was in '87 I think. And then cap passed, and the communities were upset because there had been too much growth in some neighborhoods, so what we felt is that we really needed to have, to take another look at our policies, that we needed to do a re-evaluation of the downtown plan, and that we probably needed to do an evaluation of the framework, the framework for the land use policies was something called, the growth policies, they were adopted in, I don't remember now, '72, and '73. And they were to lapse by 1990. So in '88 we began talking to the mayor and the council, and the James Street council said, well look, we said, there is a sign in here that the community values our changing and we probably need to re-evaluate these, the growth policies are about to go out, maybe we need to start this process. So in '88 there was an agreement between the mayor and the council that we need to start process to evaluate what we call the growth policies. So in 1989, we had began a work program to re-evaluate those policies and develop what we call the framework policies. And this is before growth management was on the books. So Charlie agreed to do that, and Norm was very, you know, Norm was part of the council, so when Norm took over, we were already in the process of setting this up. But he got elected and we were in the transition process, we had agreed in '89, when we were putting together an advisory group, so it was a little slowness at the beginning because you need to know who you're working with, the fact that he had already been part of the council really, and he was, he had participated quite actively in

the previous development of the policies, particularly downtown plan and some of the residential policies. That made it, it was a smooth transition that way. So we, Seattle had already embarked on that, it was, the best thing because once the growth management act passed, we were already, we had this group, an advisory committee were developing the framework policies, and what we said is, we better figure out how to transition to meet the GMA. That was probably our best, the best thing that ever happened to us, if we had to start thinking how to do it, you have to go to council to get a budget and all of that.

Gary: Listen--

Elsie: Is that--

Gary: Thank you, very much--

Elsie: Hope this helps.

Gary: Oh yeah, and I'm going to talk to Jim Parsons tomorrow--

Elsie: Oh, good, yeah. Jim is great.

[End of tape]