

PLANNING WITH PEOPLE IN MIND

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It has always been the case that change has consequences beyond immediate planning goals. A dam, for example, is built to provide hydro power, a desirable environmental goal as it mitigates against air pollution. However, people's communities or hunting grounds may be swamped, fish stock affected, and water quality altered. A freeway is built through the centre of a city to improve traffic flow. Neighbourhoods are ghettoized and air quality is affected. Even seemingly innocuous changes have social impact. It is the intent of this paper to expand the horizons of the assessment and planning process so that unanticipated negative human and environmental consequences can be avoided or minimized.

As someone who has spent his career in the arena of social programs and social policy, I have long been in pursuit of the holy-grail of what is commonly called the healthy community, or as others refer to it, the civil society. I use the metaphor holy-grail appropriately as I am speaking here of ideals which can never be fully realized. The healthy community and civil society is always a work in progress. In another era Thomas More, the renaissance humanist, referred to this ideal human state in his book, Utopia. And we know by now that Utopian societies are not achievable, or for that matter desirable. And this is one of the problems which face engineers, architects, town planners, economists, even environmentalists. Each of these disciplines trains its professionals to complete tangible physical projects. Once done the benefits of a mine, pipe line, park, or dam installations can be measured and codified. Measuring social impact is not so easy, though crime rates, divorce rates, alcohol and drug consumption levels, income levels, life spans etc. provide some measure of what constitutes a healthy community with powerful civic involvement. The intent of this paper is to see how social impact planning can be integrated into all planning projects which affect people and their communities.

As mentioned above even seeming innocuous changes have consequences beyond the intended goals. In the early 1990's Dr. Ken Banks from Laurier University, conducted a research study on civic vitality in the town of Galt Ontario. His intent was to assess the social cohesiveness of the community and to identify the factors contributing to a strong sense of community. During the early stages of his research old timers in the town spoke about the "good old days," which is not uncommon when speaking to folks my age. Change is difficult for most people but it is amplified in the majority of those us who are over fifty. In any event, Banks noted that many people identified the exact year when things began to change for the worse, which is somewhat unusual. In the late 1970's the Galt town council lobbied Canada Post successfully to institute the home delivery of mail. As a result people stopped seeing one another on a daily basis at the central post office. Like the village well, a central location to socialize as well as to catch

up on personal and town news, the post office had long been a gathering spot for the townspeople, much the way the Midnight Sun and Tim Horton's have become for groups in Whitehorse. With the demise of the post office simple social connections began to break down. For example, if elderly Mrs. Jenkins failed to come around to the post office for a couple of days it was noted by the postmaster and her friends. Someone would readily volunteer to drop by her place on their way home to insure Mrs. Jenkins was well. With door to door delivery of mail this awareness was lost. A consequence of door to door mail delivery was that Galt began to lose its basic social cohesion. An apparent desirable benefit, in fact, turned out to have negative social consequences. Few people, aside from a few grumbling old timers, had foreseen this potential consequence.

In the lexicon of planning communities are generally described by the size of their populations, the industries and businesses located there, physical infrastructure, economic viability and geographical features. What we neglect to see is that a community is its people, not buildings, roads, and economic enterprise. Thus people, a social construct, is the cornerstone upon which all physical and environmental planning should be conducted.

Therefore whenever we make reference to community planning and development, the health and social well being of residents of the village, town or city is central. At this point a few of you may be jumping ahead of me. You may be asking yourselves, if the health and well being of people are what counts most, why not simply strengthen health care, social services and build more recreational and cultural facilities? Unfortunately it is not quite so easy. And that's the problem we face in attempting to integrate social, economic, physical, and environmental factors in our planning. The above resources, definitely contribute greatly to the health and social well being of people. They do not on their own, however, form neither the basis of a healthy community nor a strong of civil society.

Dr. Fraser Mustard, former President of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, defined the two factors which contribute to healthy and successful community. He and his research colleagues concluded that a truly healthy community is one in which people are economically productive and possess a strong sense of reciprocal obligation. Economic productivity is a term known to almost everyone. Reciprocal obligation, however, is not as well understood. Basically it means that people feel it's their civic duty to look after the welfare of one another. Interestingly this concept forms the basis for what Robert Putnam entitles a strong civil society. Putnam, Making Democracy Work (1993), sought, through his research in Italy, to understand why some apparently strong societies eventually collapse. He notes that this occurs when social organizations, institutions, and volunteerism begin to wane. In other words the social glue of a community begins to lose its critical cohesiveness. Mustard pursued this notion in CIAR's work on the determinants of health. CIAR's research concluded that without balancing the social, economic, physical and environmental factors the social cohesion and vitality of communities cannot be achieved. Again this speaks to community being a social system, not a compilation of physical attributes.

Assessment and planning work is often executed according to the disciplines which professional planners and policy makers bring to their task. For example, environmental planners primarily look at the preservation and diversity of the flora and fauna found in wilderness, parklands and natural public spaces in communities. Economists centre their attention on the economic benefits of manufacturing and service industries to the community and the contribution this makes to a region's GNP. Economists, thus, give central focus to the benefits derived from low unemployment, resources, economic diversity, and productivity. In similar fashion the town planner uses his or her professional yard stick to measure community vitality in terms of housing stock, roads and physical infrastructure. Finally the soft sciences of social planning, education, and health care look almost exclusively at the number of agencies, schools, hospitals, and social programs required by a population. Such narrow thinking is to be expected given the specialized training each professional discipline brings to the planning process. We must not, however, denigrate the importance of specialized expertise. Without the skills and expertise of professional planners serious errors could occur in a planning exercise. What is called for is more integrated approach to assessment and planning work. With the recent addition of environmental impact studies in planning physical projects such as mines, roads, pipelines shopping malls etc. an important precedent has been set in achieving a more integrated approach to planning. Extending the planning exercise to include a social impact component should be made that much easier.

The concept of integrated planning is still very much a work in progress. Not all planning professionals appreciate the importance of weighing the social impact of their work, particularly those who were trained at an earlier time. As someone who spent forty-five years in the social service and social policy field I fit this profile well. In fact for most of my career I firmly believed that the health and well being of people correlates with the ratios of social service, education, and health care resources to population. Further reading and thought on the matter has now convinced me, and most of my colleagues say it's about time, that it takes more than social workers, psychologists, and health professionals to build a healthy community. Professionals in health, social, and educational programming, not to forget those in recreation and culture, cannot, by themselves, create healthy communities. It is a task which must be embraced by all professional planners, whether they are engaged full time in the role or simply staff members planning a new agency service or program. Most important of all, however, is the civic involvement of people in caring for one another and their communities. A strong sense of reciprocal obligation is essential.

You may at this point say that the need for a more integrated planning approach is self evident. Intent, however, does not equate with reality. To illustrate this point let us look at social service and health care planning as it relates to the Yukon. The Yukon takes pride in having better ratios of health and social service personnel to population than almost any other region of Canada. When we look at health and social indicators, however, our abundance of professional resources does not translate into healthy outcomes. Men and women in the Yukon live far fewer years than their counterparts in other regions of Canada. In fact, the Yukon, NWT. And Nunavut have mortality and

illness rates worse than those in many developing countries. In my work with the federal Ministerial Advisory Council on Rural Health, I discovered that the average person residing north of 60 lives fewer years than if he or she were born in Peru or Indonesia. This is a sad reality, despite the fact that health care and social services in those countries are well below those of the Yukon. Take Peru, for example, the country has an average of .9 doctors per 1,000. Canada has 2.1 doctors. Hospital beds in Peru are 1.5 beds per 1,000 while in Canada we have 4.2 beds. Even in education spending we are ahead of Peru. Peru spends 3.2% of their GDP while Canada spends 6.9% of a much greater GDP on its educational system. Why then do Yukoners not live as long as Peruvians? First off we can conclude that health and social spending does not correlate with our health status. Who is it in the Yukon who is not living as long as the average Canadian or even Peruvian? It is certainly not higher income business people and professionals in the territory. They live as long as the national average and many more years than the average Peruvian. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, distribution of health care resources, lifestyles, recreational resources, housing, and quality of education take on special importance when we make this inquiry. In our Council's report, Rural Health in Rural Hands, we begin to understand the factors which contribute to the problems of remote northern communities.

With this above example it is easy to jump to the conclusion that lack of employment opportunities must be the principal cause such miserable statistics among the Yukon's poor. According to economic planners a community that is thriving, as far as high paying jobs and low unemployment is concerned, should be a very healthy place. But let us look at this principle more closely. If high employment and good incomes were the source of health, Fort McMurray in Alberta should be amongst the healthiest communities in Canada. And yet the divorce rate in Fort McMurray is more than double that of Newfoundland. Likewise alcoholism and crime rates in Ft. McMurray are well above those in Canada's poorest provinces. Once again to understand the contradiction, you have to look at multiple factors. People living in boom communities are generally migrants from other places in Canada. They are thus at considerable distance from the support systems of their extended families and their network of old friends. Families, isolated from their natural supports, do not have the same resilience when things go wrong. Here again a more integrated approach to planning for people is required.

According to Fraser Mustard's work on health determinants there is a far weaker sense of reciprocal obligation in communities created primarily for major economic benefit. Over time, of course, boom communities generally compensate for these vulnerabilities. Given the emotional turmoil created by frail social cohesion in communities, people naturally seek homeostasis. Thus, we learn from this that communities have to be built over time. Planners can, however, accelerate the community building process through supporting social, recreational, and cultural resources. A simple thing like opening a parent drop in centre for mothers of pre school children, for example, can offer social supports which can no longer be provided by immediate family and close friends.

A further illustration demonstrates a prevailing failure between the planning visions of environmental, physical, and social planners. Only a few short years ago architects and engineers building schools and playgrounds created low maintenance functional spaces. The guiding planning principles were the containment and surveillance of children. Interestingly enough, in Ontario the same planners had earlier developed the province's correctional facilities. They achieved their goals by levelling off the playing surface, cutting down shrubs and trees which might obstruct the vigilant teacher's vision. As well they replaced grass with asphalt rationalizing that this is a good surface for court games. When I wrote my school superintendent's papers in the early 1970's I recall I had to know how high the fence around the school yard had to be. In the corner of one of these school yards sat the required playground. It came equipped with a slide, swings, monkey bars, and teeter totters until someone noted that the latter could knock out a child's teeth.

Within recent years we've come to realize that children enjoy grass, flowers, trees, and hills. The Evergreen Foundation is now hard at work reclaiming, or as they say "greening," playgrounds across Canada. Through our foundation we are supporting such recovery projects in selected communities. Recently I received a letter from a little girl in grade three. She wrote, *"It's so nice to sit under the trees when it's hot. Sometimes my friends and I lie on the grass and watch and listen to the leaves blowing in the wind."* As a child I certainly didn't have this opportunity in my inner city Toronto school. At recess in June we always sought out a wall which cast a shadow on the asphalt at afternoon recess when the sun was hottest. I am sure a therapist would interpret my move to the Yukon as compensating for this childhood loss by.

I suspect that these few illustrations have you thinking of examples from your own experience. Unfortunately too many of these examples will likely be fairly contemporary. As I said earlier intent does not equate with reality. I only quote the examples to illustrate the point that we've still a ways to go before we utilize a more integrative approach to planning, one which takes into account both environmental and social impact. Planners can, of course, change their thinking but often the institutions or governments with which they work are slow to follow.

To move forward it is critical that we have a sense of the benefits to be gained by taking into account social, economic, structural, and environmental factors in assessing and planning community projects and policies. Unless we do this we will continue to make the mistakes illustrated above. A healthy socially cohesive and vital community is an amalgam of all the above variables, as well as the cultural values of the people who reside in the community. If we are to address the tasks of assessment and development planning we must understand the critical importance of the interface between each of the above factors on the health and well being of the people who reside in communities. To this end we need to appreciate what the social impact of our planning actions might be.

Let me now speak more about the theory behind the argument for considering the social impact of physical and economic planning. Who were the thinkers and what were the themes which bring us to this point? In my estimation the work which had the greatest

initial impact on incorporating social impact considerations into planning was that of Jane Jacobs. While social planners have been around for a number of years, it was not until the publication of her seminal work, The Death and Life of great American Cities (1961), that planners began to grasp the connection between physical planning and its impact on people. Jane Jacobs recoiled against the high rise ghettoization of New York City's poor and the building of freeways through neighbourhoods. She awoke us to human considerations in town planning. For example, she noted in older low rise New York neighbourhoods that people sat out on their stoops overlooking the street while their children were at play, particularly on those humid hot summer afternoons and evenings. Neighbours conversed with one another and most importantly kept their eyes on the streets. All this disappeared when their homes were bulldozed and they were replaced with modern fifteen to twenty-five story high rise tenements with no balconies.

In desperation Jane Jacobs finally moved to a neighbourhood called the Annex in Toronto, a neighbourhood resembling the ones she praises in her book. I've had the privilege to talk with her on a number of occasions. I attribute these conversations and my reading of her work with opening my own narrow vision on how one achieves a healthy community. On the first occasion I encountered her I was unaware that the little older lady across the table from me was the esteemed Jane Jacobs. It didn't take me long to get into an argument with her and it took even less time for her to put me in my place. After the meeting she came up to me and said, "I've been thinking more about what you said, and I think you have an interesting point." Like most great minds Jane Jacobs remains open to intellectual change, something all of us can benefit from as we seek new ways to think of what contributes to healthy and civically responsive communities.

Certainly one of the earliest and best Canadian examples of considering the social impact of a physical project was that done by Thomas Berger in his Royal Commission Report on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline proposal. The report certainly raised the bar with respect to assessing the impact of a major project upon the people of a region. Unfortunately we must conclude that Berger was too far ahead of his time.

Later in my career I encountered the work of Robert Putnam in a now famous essay entitled, Bowling Alone. This led me to his major work referred to earlier, Making Democracy Work. Putnam builds on the 19th century work of de Tocqueville, Democracy in America. Alexis de Tocqueville marvelled at the role that voluntarism played in creating America's then well-functioning democratic society. Wherever he travelled in America he saw volunteer firemen, librarians, social reformers, choir members etc., a distinctly different society than what he was use to in France.

Putting the theory that civil society requires active participation of its citizenry to the test, Robert Putnam headed to Italy. In the north he found active well functioning communities where the citizenry were politically engaged. These communities also happened to be locations where citizens participated with one another in such volunteer activities such as football clubs, drama groups, choirs, or one of a number of other recreational, cultural, and social activities. In marked contrast in the south of Italy, a region which had been dominated by Norman occupation for hundreds of years, he found

that people had pulled into themselves. There kinship groups replaced community. The family is, thus, central to the social lives of individuals. Family members are still among the few people you can really trust. Interestingly the Mafia has its origins in this tight-knit defensive social structure. Parallels can be made as does street gang activities in many dysfunctional neighbourhoods in cities in North America where external threats are all too real.

Putnam goes on to suggest that communities and countries fail when people stop being involved. Regretfully this involvement is often seen as an irritant by politicians. Nevertheless, it is critical that people participate in planning for their communities. Once you feel this vitality lagging community is in decline. One of the current problems, which discourage citizen involvement, is the process of so-called community consultation. In too many instances consultation has become mere tokenism. Citizen's thoughts and suggestions during the consultation process are often ignored once a report leaves the civil service and enters the political domain. Yes, politicians allow people to have a voice in planning in their affairs but are they listening. Another weakness in the public consultation process is that it fosters planning on the basis of popularity, not on the merits of a plan. Often creative insights and new ideas are expressed by a minority of even one person. These important ideas are often neglected as they don't express popular opinion. While this paper is not intended to address the consultation process, it is largely through the involvement and input of citizens that social impact is best measured. It is sufficient at this point to say that consultation must be meaningful.

Lastly I wish to identify another prominent figure who thought out of the box with respect to integrated planning. Fritz Shumacher in his work, Small is Beautiful (1974), makes one of the most crucial observations that I have encountered over the years. He identifies economic factors as essential to the health of family and community life. Mustard, as you recall, referred to this element as economic productivity. The causal relationship between economic productivity and the health of people is particularly relevant to the Yukon. It may help to explain the non-existent correlation between our abundant health care and social service resources and the Territory's poor personal health indicators.

The importance of the local economy to community well being has most recently been acknowledged by the United Nations Commission working on economic development in the Third World. In their 2004 report, Unleashing Entrepreneurship, the UN Commissioners position economic revitalization as the most critical element in eliminating world poverty. As does Shumacher, they see micro enterprise, that is to say small companies owned and operated by local people, as the best means of improving a town's economic productivity. And remember without a productive economy a community cannot be successful or healthy.

Until recently, of course, major global corporations were seen almost exclusively as offering the greatest potential for economic development in the Third World. In the last six years our foundation, PQR Limited, has been engaged in similar entrepreneurial programming for inner city high school students in Calgary, Winnipeg, and Toronto.

Four summer Bizcamps, operated by the business schools of colleges and universities, have been established. The University of Manitoba's, Asper Centre for Entrepreneurial Studies, our original Bizcamp project, generated two student run companies large enough to sell share capital. The university, in turn, has purchased shares in these companies as part of its endowment fund investment portfolio. Much of the university's stationery and graphics, for example, is produced by one of these student owned companies. Certainly if I were asked what is the most crucial issue affecting the health and vitality of communities, it would be summed up in this quote from Shumacher's Small is Beautiful.

“If the nature of change is such that nothing is left for fathers to teach their sons, or for the sons to accept from their fathers, family life collapses. The life, work, and happiness of societies depend on certain psychological factors which are infinitely precious and highly vulnerable. Social cohesion, co-operation, mutual respect, and above all self respect, courage in face of adversity, and the ability to bear hardship- all this disintegrates and disappears when these psychological structures are gravely damaged. A man is destroyed by an inner conviction of uselessness.

Conclusion:

The evidence is irrefutable. All planning has an impact upon people as it does upon the natural environment. It is also evident that planning cannot free itself completely from negative consequences. What is most important, however, is that the major benefits of planning should contribute to the health and vitality of communities. Where negative human and environmental consequences occur as a natural result of the process they can often be mitigated by appropriate alternatives. To achieve the best results a real integrative approach should be used in all planning. As illustrated by the earlier example of the construction of playgrounds and schoolyards, planners can miss the point of their work. Playgrounds are for the benefit of children. They are not built solely for the convenience of those who want to contain children. Thus when architects and engineers are given the wrong parameters, and are left to their own devices, they can create environments very unfriendly to the user. In the above example an approach, which utilized the skills of landscape architects, engineers, environmentalists, and social planners, in meaningful consultation with users, would undoubtedly have produced more beneficial results.

The ideal, of course, is that all planners and policy makers become sensitive to human, as well as environmental factors, in project and program planning. We now know that a healthy and successful community is one which is economically productive and has a strong sense of reciprocal obligation. The incorporation of this knowledge into the work of planners and policy makers will result in plans and policies friendly and supportive to individuals and families. Let us plan with people in mind.

