

Let's get unbiased input on planning

Citizen collaboration: Randomly selected people can see the big picture better than those with vested interests

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Citizen committees collaborating with planners would avoid the polarization that often creates an impasse, writes Bob Ransford.

Photograph by: PNG, Files

It's time to try something new to craft long-term plans to manage growth in our neighbourhoods and cities.

It's time to try a process that puts the public interest ahead of personal interests or neighbourhood interests. It's time for a more deliberative approach to decision-making, rather than the adversarial approach that is often the final step in most planning processes today.

As the Metro Vancouver region continues to intensify with inevitable population growth, the issues of accommodating and managing that growth become increasingly more complex. Not a day goes by when we don't hear or read something in the mainstream media about angry citizens fighting city hall over neighbourhood plans or protesting against a proposed development project. Twitter timelines and Facebook posts perpetually produce baskets full of dirty laundry, streaming endless negativity that guarantees the impossibility of public consensus.

It doesn't seem to matter how much outreach is done by planners in crafting long-term plans or how many concessions developers try to make to accommodate community interests. People still feel they weren't heard. They believe their interests weren't considered when decisions were made. They don't buy into plans that are being put in place. Good planning suffers.

I've talked before about more collaborative forms of planning. I am a big believer in getting right to the task of physical planning — involving the public in designing the form-makers of places, instead of talking about visions, values, aspirations, goals, rules and regulations. The discipline of the charrette, a design-based collaborative planning methodology, works best for this.

But before you try to involve people in finding solutions to physical problems and drawing and designing places, you need to involve them in making the tough decisions. You need to know the direction everyone wants to go. You need to

As shown in <http://www.coalitionforcolumbiasdowntown.org/positionpapercharretteprocess.htm> the charrette discipline can be corrupted unless a series of basic principles are adhered to. - cjk

define key principles that will direct how you are going to get there. That means making trade-offs, making the tough decisions.

Good planning requires good public decision-making. Good public decision-making requires plenty of public trust. To earn public trust, decision-makers need to bring the considered judgment of everyday people to bear. But current neighbourhood and community planning methods focus on engaging primarily the public whose interest are most affected.

Obviously, these people have a vested interest in what happens in their backyard, their block or their neighbourhood. They have an emotional connection to their space. They also often have a financial stake in what happens, with their life's savings tied up in their home. That often makes it difficult for them to see the bigger picture. Their concern for how decisions in their neighbourhood impact the wider community or the region is tempered by their self-interest.

In fact, many citizens won't even choose to participate in community planning unless they fear their private interests are affected.

But good planning needs to consider not just the local interests and the interests of a few. It needs to consider the wider interests — citywide, regional and even global. Think global, act local needs to be more than a mantra in an age where we have come to understand that man's impact on the planet's ecosystems is threatening the planet's survival.

This is the broad context in which deliberations need to focus when local trade-offs are being negotiated and when the search is on for common ground that can define a direction for future plans.

A new model of deliberate decision-making has begun to emerge in tackling urban issues that is aimed at bringing to bear the considered judgment of those without vested interests — randomly selected citizens — on complex issues where debates can become polarized. The system is based on the jury model. It has been tried with some success in Australia.

Most community engagement by planners or developers involves those with active interest, inevitably those with the most at stake. This model reaches beyond those with active interest by recruiting them randomly and selecting a panel or group based on a representation of the wider population. They are then given the time and the access to information furnished by all interests — experts, governments, project proponents, public interest groups and citizens. They then deliberate and make considered decisions.

The closest we ever came in Canada to utilizing a model like this was the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform just over a decade ago that considered changes to the provincial electoral system.

The citizens' assembly was successful in that, after nearly six months of learning, listening and deliberating, they recommended changing the B.C. electoral system to one based on a single transferable vote system.

While voters later twice rejected that idea in two referendums, there can be no denying that the complex issue was analyzed, fully considered and put to voters.

A citizens' assembly is being considered for the Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood plan, where a long traditional planning process hasn't been able to resolve disagreement in the neighbourhood.

I don't know what kind of system is being considered for that assembly.

Perhaps a randomly selected jury type system could be considered.

It's time we took the risk to try new methods.

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