

## LESSONS FROM A PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SESSION

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### **Abstract**

The paper analyzes a participatory planning process and identifies challenges in attaining the goals and ideals of planning processes that involve community input. The paper argues that good communication and openness to an inclusive process do not always result in outcomes that represent the consensus position of a given community. There are other ingredients needed, such as a willingness to give up agendas, a care to validate opinions regardless of who they come from, and ultimately a good dose of education on HOW to participate.

**Keywords:** *Participatory Planning, Public Input, Community Voice*

Ever since our first planning theory lectures, we have learned that planning as a practice has moved from a paradigm relying extensively on the all-knowing specialist planner, who makes decisions about the future based on a thorough analysis of pertinent information, to one involving a collaborative approach in which decisions about the future of shared urban spaces are made through a process of collaboration among the people/groups with a stake in the community. This collaborative approach to planning raises many questions: Who are the stakeholders? How do you make sure that all of them participate in the decision-making process? How do you make sure that all voices are heard? How do you make sense of conflicting views? How can you reach consensus? All of these have been discussed at length in the literature, and various strategies have been devised and are being taught in planning school under the rubric of "public input." However, it is not until we experience public participation personally that we understand the powerful nature of collaboration and how easily it can result in manipulation.

I recently participated in a public input session regarding a large site that a relatively well-to-do community from Southeast Michigan

had bought through a public bond. The city planners wanted to hear what the citizens wanted to do with the site since their tax money was paying for the bond, so they enlisted the help of a group of planning students to hold a public input session and come up with a set of recommendations. We gathered at the city hall community room, a brand-new room with all the latest technology in place, to hear a presentation about the current planning effort. Then we broke into groups to discuss the issue at hand. In my role as a facilitator, I directed the discussions of a small group of people through a carefully planned session, in which they were asked to give their opinions and ideas about the future of the site. Every activity was carefully staged so that it would not last more than 10-15 minutes and would guide the discussion from actively engaging with a map of the site, to brainstorming ideas, and finally to reaching a consensus about the best three possible uses for the site. Throughout the discussion, it became apparent that different people had different experiences with the process of public participation. Some would openly profess knowledge of what we were supposed to do: "This is a visioning session. We are not supposed to think of the practical aspects of making our ideas happen, just come up with ideas." Others were obviously there to steer the group in a direction that suited them, and made extensive arguments as to why a certain use should be pursued. Still others were there to protect a narrow interest, such as the tree buffer in front of their house. Finally, some were there simply to see what was going to happen; they had little to say and were not familiar with the site even though they lived in its immediate vicinity.

At the end of the day the meeting was considered a success. Though the site had been a

bone of contention in the past, no major conflict broke out and people came up with sensible ideas for the future. The planning process could continue. Such text-book situations are presented in the planning theory texts we study. Patsy Healey, for example, explains the process of collaborative planning as a combination of five factors: choosing the appropriate forum to which all community members have access, setting the right tone for the discussion so that different “languages” can be heard and different groups can get involved, sorting through the jumble of different ideas and arguments to arrive at a common understanding, creating a new discourse, and devising a strategy for continually critiquing and evaluating the consensual decision that has been reached.<sup>1</sup>

In all but the last aspect, the public input session I participated in followed “the rules.” On its face, the process could easily be ranked in the third-highest rung of the public participation ladder devised by Sherry Arnstein – partnership between the authorities and the public.<sup>2</sup> Out of a jumble of ideas, a few were distilled into the wishes of a group of people, and these ideas would guide the future plan.

However, a closer look reveals a different picture. Obviously, even in a community of relatively equal incomes and levels of education, some people are more skilled in steering things in the direction that they desire, and people with lower levels of interest and public participation skills end up being “convinced” of the validity of one course of action or another. Is this type of convincing a consensus or is it micro-level manipulation? In all likelihood, after a public input session fashioned as an active exercise, a discussion with a “game for grown-ups” flavor, people went home feeling good about what they had accomplished, and it won’t be until later on that they think about the consequences of their participation.

And how about the results? In the aftermath of the public input session, it became clear that the city officials, who had commissioned the students to come up with the plan, had already decided that they wanted to give as many people as possible access to the site; consequently, they

wanted to push a lot more development on the site than the majority of the people at the session had desired. Therefore, when it came to what recommendations the students should make, the ideas that involved more development were to take precedence over the ones that did not. Can we say that the plan would not take into account the wishes of the community? Probably not. However, there would probably be as much resemblance between the public input and the final plan as there is between the life of a village community and the ethnography written by an anthropologist concerned with birth and death rites. The stories told by the community will be incorporated in the final product, but the spin put on them will suit the whim of the author or, in our case, the client commissioning the plan. Still, the city has covered its back. If citizens complain years from now when nobody remembers the public input session, the city officials can easily claim that these decisions were reached through public consensus – and therefore represent the wishes of the community – even though they actually represent what the people in charge wanted to see as the wishes of the community.

This raises an important issue about the meaning of community consensus. When do the ideas of people in a community become the voice of that community? Based on this experience and a number of texts about public participation it seems that we can think of different levels. The first one would probably be a situation in which the voices of a few people that don’t necessarily belong to the community become of the voice of the community. Such examples appear in the literature describing some of the Model Cities community input sessions.<sup>3</sup> On a higher level would be a situation in which the ideas and opinions of a few people from the community, usually opinions that suit people in power, become the voice of the community. Following would be a situation in which the voices of a majority of people become the voice of the community. The example I presented probably fits somewhere between these two levels. And finally, to really talk about a community consensus, I imagine an ideal situation in which

a perfect compromise where nobody gets exactly what they want, but where a new idea/discourse takes form in the manner described by Healey.

The lessons that I learned from this experience can be summed up as follows. Not even a good planning process necessarily results in an equitable outcome, and even in communities without great disparities between groups of people some will try to push their own agendas, sometimes in conflict with the majority opinion. Planning theory has set some ideals that we come out of planning school wanting to put into practice, but in truth, even in relatively uncontroversial situations living up to those ideals is harder than we may think.

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### **References**

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### **Endnotes**

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