



New Directions in Public Participation: Learning Experiences in Seattle, WA

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Abstract

Public participation is a procedural requirement for many planning activities. It informs and educates citizens about decisions that will affect their way of life. As well, it engages the public in the decision making process. This paper looks at the benefits and drawbacks of public participation. Its purpose in the planning and political system, and the new direction it is heading towards. Further more, a program initiated by the City of Seattle is examined. This program reached optimum levels of participation by allowing citizen control over community development. Finally, the Area Redevelopment Plan process is criticized and the benefits offered by adopting a similar initiative in Calgary presented. The issues of the ARP process are examined in a fashion so as to solve the existing community development problems in Calgary

New Directions in Public Participation: Learning Experiences in Seattle, WA

*“One measures the health of society by the quality
of functions performed by local citizens.”*

- Alexis de Tocqueville

(Wyman, 1999; ix)

Introduction:

This paper is a report on the experiences and information obtained during a field studies course to Seattle, Washington. The City of Seattle takes on a variety of approaches to urban and regional planning. Their recent initiatives in community development are stellar and should be studied in order to learn from their experiences. The objective of this report is to review the direction Public Participation is heading, its benefits and downfalls, and to investigate how Seattle has taken public engagement to its highest form, citizen control.

The municipal government of Seattle new initiative is to have a strong link between the community and the City. Their emphasis has not been a superficial attempt to emphasize public participation in the planning process but to move towards “bottom-up planning” initiatives. Bottom-up planning or allowing citizen control over the planning process is a growing trend in community development. The city of Seattle is an innovative example of how a municipal government can launch a successful bottom up “planning” initiative.

An examination of public participation will be conducted. A comprehensive review of public participation, its trends, benefits, and downfalls will be explored. The new initiatives taking place in Seattle will be examined in detail. More specifically, we

will look at how and why these initiatives got started, what the initiatives entailed, and how successful both the community and the city governments were at accomplishing their objectives. An evaluation of the process undergone in Seattle will be conducted. Lastly, there is an opportunity for Calgary to learn how it could benefit from the experience and knowledge gained during the field visit to Seattle.

What is public participation?

Public participation is the means by which the public is engaged and involved in the planning process. The degree of participation or public involvement can vary. Most jurisdictions in North America have government regulations that dictate when a project must have a public participation component. But the degree in which the general public is truly involved in the process can vary from one project to the other. The depth of this process varies according to the project, the complexity of the project (both politically and culturally), and the degree of control the leading agents wish to retain over the process as a whole.

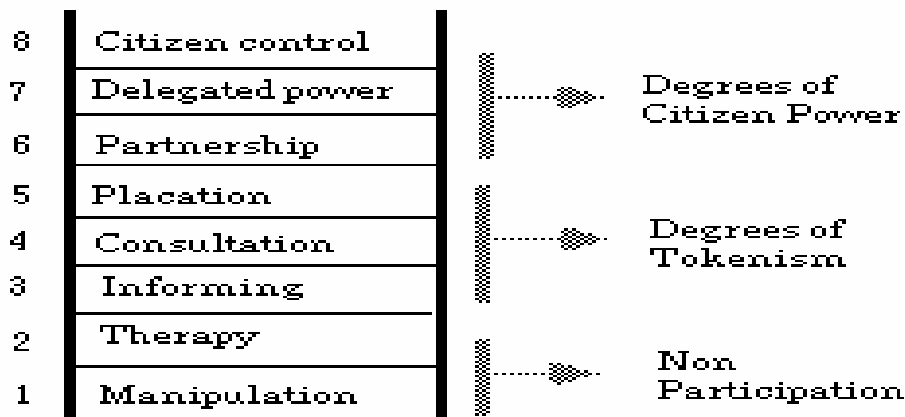


FIGURE 1- THE BOONDOCKS COMIC STRIP BY AARON MC GRUDER

Public participation can manifest itself in a variety of forms. It can mean that the public is directly informing a project, the public will be consulted on the decisions

other people have made, that there will be a hearing to inform the public about what will happen, or a combination the above events. Mostly, public participation is a process in which various individuals or stakeholder groups are consulted in regards to a project that will affect them in the short or long term. Depending upon the objectives of the project, public participation is meant not only to inform the public but also to allow the public and various interest groups to provide input and inform the process. Sherry Arnstein best described the various levels of participation with her analogy of the “Ladder of Participation”. On the lower levels

FIGURE 2 – LADDER OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION



of the ladder you will find manipulation and therapy while the highest level is citizen control (See Figure 2). It is on the highest level of citizen participation that the “Have-nots” have direct control over the process and direction of the project. There are no intermediaries between the community and the source of funds (Arnstein, 1969). There has been mounting importance placed upon the amount of public participation in the planning process. This has been influenced by both a

shift in planning theory and political stress (Campbell, 2000). The shift in planning theory represents a move towards a more communicative planning process. At its core, it is a move towards a collaborative effort between both the professional planning community, the various interest groups and stakeholders that are affected by the intended actions or policy, and various levels of government.

Fuelling this shift in planning are the politicians. Political stress is placed upon “democratising local government” through community involvement (Campbell, 2000). This allows the public to inform political representatives of the issues involved, as well as increase the accountability and service delivery of the government that serves them.

Downfalls of Public Participation

It is often argued that the effectiveness of the public sector is dependent upon a greater amount of public engagement (Campbell, 2000). Public participation alludes to the ability to represent the views of the public and move towards obtaining a consensus. The ability to attain public input and involve members of the public that may not have a chance to be heard otherwise, are elements in favour of the public participation process. Although governments are increasingly involving the public, public participation does have its downfalls.

Conversely, the argument for an increasing amount of public participation is often rebutted by pointing out times when the public participation process has not only

reduced the effectiveness of government bodies but has also “watered down” the outcomes of the project. Public participation is often viewed as favouring those that “scream the loudest” and does not often represent the needs or desires of all individuals¹. As well, public meetings, consultations, or “Open Houses” can often be slanted towards one ideology and misrepresent the desire of the public. Open Houses are also argued to only attract those who are most affected and not those that may be in support of the project (Innes, 2000).

In Innes 2000 she writes, “The traditional methods of public participation in government decision making simply do not work”. Her critique goes on to say that the methods of participation discourage busy thoughtful people from wasting their time and often seem like “rituals designed only to satisfy legal requirements.”

There is a need to think out of the box to combat the downfalls of what is supposed to be a fantastic process. Much of the criticism regarding the different approaches in engaging the public in the public participation process questions the ability of the process to reach the level of public interest. (Abelson, 1999)

What is Public Participation?

In 1995, the City of Seattle created the Department of Neighbourhoods. The Department’s four-year task was to create communities that were not only places, but also areas that expressed the passion and excitement people felt about their

¹ In a Winnipeg case study, extensive public participation was used to consult a community on the redevelopment of a heritage building into a community center. The community only seemed to get what they

neighbourhood. In 1987, the Department of Neighbourhoods established a Neighbourhood Planning and Assistance Program. Its mission was:

“To create a partnership between the City and its neighbourhoods in order to provide the neighbourhoods with tools and resources for planning and development which reflect their needs and values.”

(City of Seattle, 2000)

The City of Seattle puts an emphasis on “staying in touch” with its customers, the inhabitants of the city. The Little City Halls or neighbourhood service centres facilitate this. The service centre is a decentralised servicing system the City of Seattle manages to make itself accessible to the public. The service centres offer a convenient location for inhabitants to pay taxes, get information about the City, and it offers a municipal court for small claims or disputes. This is another element that although it does not involve public participation, it does involve an element of public information dispersion.

In 1995, the City of Seattle created new self-help projects, which initiated the creation of a new department, the Neighbourhood Planning office. The office was given a mandate to head up the self-help initiatives for the neighbourhoods of Seattle. The Neighbourhood Planning Office had a four year time period in which to complete its mandate. The Neighbourhood Planning Office initiated various programs. The programs included The Neighbourhood Plan Program,

wanted because they had the loudest voices. Similar communities with the same problems did not get the same attention.

Neighbourhood Matching Fund, the Community Meeting Places Program, and the Neighbourhood Street Fund.

The move towards self-help initiatives gave the neighbourhoods in Seattle the ability to determine their own “destiny”. The program is unique, as it allowed communities to create their own community plan. The interested neighbourhoods participated by following the application process and preparing a budget for the \$50, 000 in funding they would receive. This was to be used to develop a neighbourhood plan either themselves or with a hired professional (City of Seattle <http://www.cityofseattle.net/don/History.htm#Intro>).

The Neighbourhood Plan Program provided each of the participating communities with a plan of action. This was a description of the requirements needed to be included in the end document. The City of Seattle did insist that all plans are consistent with The City of Seattle’s Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan, required by the state’s Growth Management Plan, covers issues relating to land use, transportation, housing, capital facilities, utilities, and economic growth and sets all encompassing policy objectives. The plan provided a focus and a direction for the communities to follow.

The inspiration for the Neighborhood Plan initiative was during the development of Seattle’s Comprehensive Plan. During the creation of the comprehensive plan, a policy was created to ensure that there were future initiatives that “inspired the

inclusion of a neighborhood planning element and a human development element.”
(City of Seattle,

<http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/dclu/Planning/comprehensive/homecp.htm>). The
Neighborhood Community Plan initiative evolved from following up on this policy.

The Community Plan program which took place over four years, now has 38 plans completed and has undergone a process that assess the plans according to their compatibility with Seattle’s comprehensive plan. The assessment has now been completed and The City of Seattle adopted all 38 plans.

There were three steps to the adoption process. The City of Seattle developed an approval and adoption matrix, which outlined how the city would implement the neighborhood plan. The adoption package includes three set of documents: The Approval and Adoption Matrix, The Resolution, and The Ordinance.

The matrices are used to see how the plan is being implemented. The matrices are divided into two sections, key strategies (complex projects associated with key citywide strategies), and additional activities for implementation (activities not directly associated with key strategies).

The matrices are then translated into a detailed work program set for the community. This work program is an approved set of actions that the City will initiate to help implement the Neighborhood Plan. This section is called The Resolution.

The Ordinance adopts portions of the Neighborhood Plans as amendments to the City's 20-year visioning document The Seattle Comprehensive Plan. As well as amendments are also made to the City's Land Use Code. The City Council then approved the matrices listed and recognized each neighborhood plan by resolution.

At this point in time, The City of Seattle has decided to reevaluate their Comprehensive Plan. The reassessment of their own "Policy Docket" (City of Seattle, <http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/dclu/planning/comprehensive/PolicyDocket.htm>). is occurring because the City of Seattle saw many planning and policy issues that affected communities on a citywide basis. The issues raised by communities varied from design guidelines specific to neighborhoods, to the protection of view corridors, to community character preservation, to parking meters and the hours in which they are used. The objective of the policy reassessment is to align Seattle's Comprehensive Plan with the plans the communities submitted.

Although it is not stated on the web site or in any planning documents about the process, it is fair to say that a policy realignment on the part of the city is a surprising outcome. It can only be assumed that the community plans were even more successful than the City of Seattle had predicted.

Learning Application for Calgary

Calgary has experienced many setbacks and difficulties when dealing with community development issues. The plan used in Calgary for communities is the ARP (Area Redevelopment Plan). This plan, although it is statutory and adopted by council, is second to the by-law and are often not even consulted. ARP's are criticised by communities, politicians, and planners alike for their inconsistency with the Calgary Master plan (The Calgary Plan), their soft policy statements, and their inability to direct or produce change in communities.

Even though communities struggle with the long drawn out process that they must undergo when involved in developing an ARP, communities will still adamantly request that the process be undergone in their community. Since the ARP is a statutory plan and adopted by council the community feels like the government is still accountable to uphold the decisions of the communities. The communities often forego other more appropriate plans for the needs of their community in order to achieve the statutory status of the ARP.

In 1992, council developed a priority list of 32 communities that were selected to undergo the ARP process. Ten years later, this priority list still has not been completed. Today, the ARP process has been quoted as being "out-dated, inefficient, and unsuccessful" by Richard Parker, the Head of the Land-Use and Transportation Division at the City of Calgary (Federation of Calgary Communities Newsletter, 2000). In the same article, Parker reported that other community

plans were being explored to replace the ARP. Two years later no new strategy has been developed. Seattle can provide direction on how to proceed in Calgary.

The benefits of adopting a process that is similar to Seattle:

1. City planners can now focus on other more complex issues
2. Specifically set a budget for the community to work within. This money could be used as the community sees fit. I.e. launching community initiatives, street improvements, tree planting, historic preservation
3. Educated and informs the general public of the policy objectives adopted by the city and requires the community to work with in that framework.

I.e. Communities would have to establish how they would meet the City's objective to increase density sensitively
4. Communities have "citizen control" over the process and their outcome will be representative of their goals and objectives. Happy communities equate happy politicians.
5. Time and money is not wasted. The community has a specific budget and is unable to obtain more funds.
6. The community is accountable for the plan they develop.
7. As the plan is approved by council, the government is accountable to ensure the plan is implemented.

Benefits to the Community

1. Process produces an outcome
2. Holds government and politicians accountable
3. Plan is done by people who already know the community inside and out
4. The community can determine for themselves if a professional is involved, who they hire and in what capacity.
5. Funding is given to proceed about the project the way the community sees fit.

Conclusion

Seattle's abdication of power to the community has taken public participation to the next level by emphasising the accountability of the government and the community. Citizen control over community development within an established framework of community objectives has exceeded the expectation of The City of Seattle and has increased citizen satisfaction with government and their response to their needs and desires (Unique Funding, 2002).

One of the criticisms of this process is the steep learning curve many of the community organisations had to undergo to see this process through.

Understanding the requirements of the document, being led through a process of visioning, and understanding the planning process could be difficult for those who are not already familiar with how a municipal government functions.

Being a four-year process, it is a significant amount of time to rely on the good will of volunteers. Volunteers are not obligated to stay devoted to their projects and although there are no reports on this problem, rest assured that community organisations lost some of their key players during this four year time period. Setbacks, like the loss of a key member of the community group, can often prevent the project from being completed.

The approach taken by the City of Seattle to ask for applications and fund community to either hire a professional or to undergo the process themselves, allowed the individual “project team” to determine the best path for their community. This decision avoided many problems that could have occurred during the process had the project been led by “City employed” professionals. Having third party professionals employed by the community to produce a document for the city meant that the community was the client and not the city. The community had full control over the direction of the process and knew what was required to have the plan approved.

The surprising outcome was that the City of Seattle re-aligned their policy docket to match the plans submitted by the community. This is an indicator of the success and most likely quality of the plans submitted to the city for approval. The community plans probably developed stronger policies than the City would or could have develop themselves. Politics and fear of public disapproval usually hamper the City when creating their own general policy.

The project in Seattle on the whole was successful. It would be highly recommended that Seattle develop a process for monitoring and evaluating the success of this initiative. Due to the recent nature of the project very few criticisms could not be found.

The City of Seattle reached Arnstiens highest level of citizen engagement on her “Ladder of Participation”. In the case of Seattle, the “Have-nots” had complete control over the entire job of planning, policymaking and managing a program. Plans were accomplished within budget, to the satisfaction of the community members, citizens truly informed the process, and the result was the City realigning their overall policies and objectives with the communities.

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