

Fear and Loathing in the Planning Profession: Ten Comments on the Political Factor

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Based on the author's experiences with local and state land use planning programs in North Carolina, Florida, and Virginia, this article concludes that the value of technical planning skills must be considered secondary to the more significant and unpredictable world of political reality. To integrate politics into the planning process, the planner must have the determination to see the job through, more than a passing awareness of public relations, and the ability to project fairness above all else.

Politics is the key to successfully making a difference in the planning field. Several situations involving serious political players, who also happened to be in a position to make or break long term planning efforts, have colored my thinking. I hope my comments are challenged, argued, and debated. Outrage and agreement are also welcome. More than anything else, I want to see the political process identified and studied as a key to planning successes and failures. I hate politics. I love politics. I can go either way.

You have heard the philosophical question: Does a tree make noise when it falls in a forest with no one around to hear it? Planners should be asking a similar question: Does planning make an impact in the real world, if through the political process, solutions and plans are never adopted or implemented? I say no. Planning must be an integral part of the political process. And although I do not recommend that all planners carry snake bite kits to counter political venom, it has always worked for me.

Fourteen years as a professional planner is a lot of time in which to make mistakes. I have found several things that would have helped me accomplish more and gain better understanding from my experiences. Ten of my observations are discussed below.

ONE

Do not take any credit for developing a land use plan. Until it has been adopted and implemented in the political arena, you have not done very much.

Your real job began once the last public hearing was held and your elected officials adopted a comprehensive plan. Implementation is the critical component of the solution, whatever the issue. There are many examples of successful

strategies and major efforts to create state or local enabling legislation, and similar examples of difficult, tedious and time consuming efforts to get planning programs adopted, but few examples that result in implementation that addresses the problems at hand. The planning triad is made up this way: technical competence, .05 percent; necessary legal framework (local, state, regional or federal), .05 percent; and implementation, 99.9 percent. Why should anyone be satisfied with anything less than the resolution of the problem at hand? It certainly is easier this way, and there are more examples of success at the first two levels than the last. Maybe it is because we are not willing to look at what we do in the comprehensive way that we preach. More likely, it concerns the relative state and status of the planning profession generally: we are where the medical profession was when bleeding the patient and using leeches were everyday events.

Are we advanced in solving problems if solutions are never implemented because politically they could never work? Why should anyone get credit for such solutions? Planners are still banging rocks together as tools while the political system has discovered metal. Until the responsibility for understanding, evaluating and participating in the political process of implementation is accepted, we are relegated to the path of little real effectiveness.

The planning profession gives itself too much credit for

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preparing and presenting solutions that will not be implemented. Instead of looking at this all too common result pessimistically, implementation failures must be considered in relative terms. Planning failure only occurs when planners divorce themselves from the political process and give up. This is easy to do with solutions that are too technical, time consuming, expensive, and politically tenuous. The answer is maintaining sufficient fortitude and determination to regroup and try again after the first, second, third, fourth and following setbacks. You have to be there to have a chance.

The state of Florida designated the Florida Keys an Area of Critical State Concern in 1975. It took eleven years, until 1986, to get a comprehensive land use plan adopted locally that met state planning standards and land development regulations. Many different local and state politicians, appointed officials and various citizen groups participated in more than 100 formal public hearings. All of this was the easy part. The planning program will have failed unless the real objective--protecting the unique environment of the Keys while providing for appropriate economic growth--is implemented.

TWO

Make sure you speak to the elected official(s) last when policy issues are being decided.

Regardless of the promises made, it is convenient for politicians to be affected most by the person getting in the last word. This usually relates more to private rather than public conversations, unless the decision is already locked. Make sure any commitment you get is made as close as possible to the upcoming decision date. If at all possible, get the official's personal calendar for that last, critical week. Know who else is making contact, anticipate their comments, and have a response ready.

After spending a considerable amount of time with the swing vote commissioner on an upcoming subdivision variance, I left convinced that I had the necessary assurance that the vote would be 3-2 in my favor. I got the vote right, but the wrong result. I discovered later that the owners of the subdivision had lunch with the commissioner one hour prior to the public vote, and managed to discount all of the arguments I had made. I learned not to leave such politicians unattended, especially immediately before critical votes.

THREE

Environmental rationale carries less weight than economic reality for the politician.

This should also be true for the planner, but for some reason, planners have the impression that subjective arguments about environmental quality do not have to be countered by objective measures of economic gain. I see

frequent failures based on this concept, and limited successes when economic factors are appropriately considered. I also see abuses of economic information when planners are either untrained or unaware of what is available to them or are unable to objectively evaluate what has been "cooked up" by a project applicant. Unfortunately, this is a briar patch no matter which way you turn. Environmental and economic information is frequently subjective, although there is always some objective information. The planner should be in a position to know the relative merits of the information presented in order to develop and present the most informed opinion.

The Avtex Plant in Front Royal, Virginia, was closed in 1989 after it had dumped PCBs into the Shenandoah River for several years in violation of numerous state and federal water quality standards. It was the sole production source in the United States of carbonized rayon filament rocket motor nozzles for military and civilian applications. When the federal government learned of the problem, the Environmental Protection Agency did nothing, and did not pass along what it did know to state agencies, which were seemingly incapable of making such determinations.

Not only did the state do nothing, one of its U.S. Senators helped obtain federal funds to keep the plant in operation. The plant contributed 400 jobs to the local economy. Only a year earlier, it employed 1,300 people, but other environmental transgressions caused employment to decline. After the newspapers described the plant's operations, things began to change. Even then, the publicity probably would not have amounted to much except for these revelations taking place during a recently concluded gubernatorial race and the fact that another facility was coming on line in Tennessee.

FOUR

Know your elected and appointed officials' constituencies, and anticipate which ones may address them on a given issue. Your support base should be broad enough to include one representative of each.

Your ability to influence decisions is directly related to the number of constituencies supporting your position. Without a majority, you do not really have a position that means anything. In the absence of credible constituencies, you should be in a good position to directly influence the decision makers. Not enough use is made of public opinion polls as a basis for understanding community thinking. These are invaluable in targeting policy areas for public workshops and education.

The planning community is not doing enough to help define issues; it is too concerned with presenting solutions. We are in the business of selling ourselves, and selling requires some concept of sales, marketing and public rela-

tions. It is taken for granted that planners either intuitively know such things or that this is not part of our concern. Support from constituencies is rarely given; it is gained by hard, time-consuming outreach work. Short term results from such efforts are rare, but that should not be the focus anyway. A well-informed public is the best chance for gaining constituents and influencing policy.

The initial efforts to adopt a performance-based growth management plan for the Florida Keys were made with no constituency in mind. Planning concepts of environmental protection, adequate public facilities, and appropriate economic development were sold locally to no one in particular. Progress was made only after the political forces affecting the five-member county commission were identified. That understanding altered the approach and time spent with various commissioners, and led to a correct judgment that the wrong commissioner had been identified as the critical third vote.

FIVE

Understand the dynamics of your local political situation as it relates to regional, state and federal interests.

Political forces in your community may or may not be locally based. When state or federal programs are involved, there is a high probability that outside interests will be a factor. A state program will usually have the broadest support base outside of a local area, especially if it is implementing controversial legislation. Although outspoken local opposition is likely to influence the local political situation, its effect outside those political boundaries will be limited. When a strong commitment exists at the state level to carry out what is perceived locally to be controversial, there must be a significant political constituency at work.

It comes down to the number of votes affected locally versus the number outside the same jurisdiction. Since it is likely that some local support will exist for such programs, even in the face of vocal protests from the majority of elected officials, the planner has to perform the delicate and diplomatic balancing act to stay the course. Remember that although public pronouncements of outrage may play well locally, they will have little effect elsewhere. And more than anything else, this will limit your maneuvering room which is always needed politically.

Powerful political forces outside the Keys community influenced Florida officials in the approval and acceptance of a Keys land use plan. Controversial government actions involved one vote of the Florida Cabinet, an intervening ruling of the Florida Supreme Court, and a law of the Florida Legislature designating the Florida Keys an Area of Critical State Concern. With only 20,000 registered voters in the Keys, about half of whom supported a state role in local land use planning, it was apparent that state political leaders had little

to lose in supporting such efforts. In fact, given the power of several statewide environmental groups, it is good politics to support and defend the state imposed land use planning program. It is also important that the largest newspaper in the state strongly supports good environmental planning for the Keys. Its position always demands the attention of any noteworthy political figures.

SIX

Always expect a politician to make something other than a rational decision when money is involved.

No decision made in the political area is immune to irrational thinking. Irrational thinking, however, is a misnomer for the political process. It should be labeled political expediency. This can mean many things, but more and more, as large sums of public funds are involved, it frequently means either budget shifting or tax increases. Both can be detrimental to a politician's good health.

However, paying for a program solution must be part of the planning solution. Feasible funding sources and methods of payment are as much a part of any answer as the technical planning component. The easier it is for the elected official to write something off because of cost, the more likely it is that you will fail. When infeasible funding sources are part of the solution, there is really no solution at all.

The performance-based growth management plan for the Florida Keys is a staff intensive device. Before it was adopted, it was obvious that the lack of computer assistance had severely hampered the existing staff's ability to address multiple planning issues. At budget time, it was easy to deny pleas for assistance, even though the benefits of reduced processing time, better permit tracking, and substantially improved report writing were well documented. It was always more politically expedient to appropriate funds for things other than an expensive mainframe computer.

During the plan adoption process, an astute consultant recommended that the planning department be funded as a special tax district, with its operating costs funded by building permit fees and state assistance grants. Previously, all such money simply went into the general fund and was politically doled out. There never seemed to be enough money for the planning department, given the developing animosities over tougher land use plan implementation.

However, once the special taxing district began collecting funds that could only be used for planning purposes, we were able to secure unanimous approval for the purchase of the needed computer system. This was done with the support of the county administration, which saw the computer as the basis for developing its own system, and the local building industry, which saw reduced processing time and improved permit tracking to be in its best interest.

SEVEN

Planners do not have divine insight into land use planning problems and solutions.

For many planners, there is something threatening about receiving proposals from anywhere but their offices, whether they be from laymen, other planners or politicians. It is as if any idea or concept not originating from that office is somehow tainted. There is no single correct solution. Political reality usually means that what works in one community will not work the same way in another. You must be objective enough to look at any suggestion, whatever the source.

Moreover, you should be wary of solutions that have worked in other communities and are applied to a different setting with little attempt to modify them in consideration of local situations. By the time such solutions are filtered through the political reality mill, complete change, if not outright rejection, can be expected. Those that are not should be suspect--either the decision maker does not understand what she or he is being asked to approve, or they simply have not read it. Watch out. No matter what the circumstances, solutions adopted without insight into the problem at hand are doomed to failure. Efforts to slip controversial regulations or poorly understood policies past an unsuspecting board are rarely successful in the long run, and can hurt your credibility tremendously. The planning professional's job is to educate the elected and appointed officials on the pros and cons of a proposed solution, with the final decision, even the "incorrect" one, reserved to them alone. The planner's privilege is to make an informed recommendation.

The contiguous lot rule, made part of the Florida Keys Comprehensive Plan, was poorly understood, legally controversial, and was transferred from a somewhat similar regulation that was originally part of the Sanibel Island Plan. Discounting local protestations from lay and professional people, the political leadership adopted the rule with little real understanding of it. This element of a controversial regulation designed to lower residential development densities in otherwise developable and previously platted and recorded subdivisions, limited owners with two lots to building

only one residence. Although the second lot could be used as permanent open space, any resale investment value was effectively eliminated. The rule stood for three years before being struck down in a legal challenge. A great deal of credibility, time and effort was lost in attempting to implement this concept. The flaw was not in the legal aspects of the rule, as questionable as those might appear. It rests with the understanding that the planners knew "best"--and besides, it had "worked" somewhere else. It was not publicly acknowledged that the rule had also failed a similar legal challenge in the other locality.

EIGHT

Politicians have learned to laugh at themselves--they should. Planners take themselves too seriously--we need to learn from the politicians.

The first time you are verbally attacked in public by an elected official, it is hard to be amused. Planners are such easy targets. Any politician usually looks good abusing, criticizing and severely questioning the planning staff. Many constituents enjoy this type of entertainment, and many private sector employees are willing to accept the stereotyped picture of the pencil pushing bureaucrat sitting behind a desk, doing whatever it is that we do, knowing that we could not get a job in the real world. You should not be concerned about such commentary. I find that it usually

comes from the less intelligent segment. Motivation and intent are infrequently vicious, although it is always best to assume that barking dogs will bite. Consider the source and enjoy it for what it is. Accept a basic public service maxim: praise is rare, criticism is constant, and work is never ending.

In my previous position, I had only been in the office a few months when our local senator and the former representative were calling for my dismissal. I was being attacked for designing a land acquisition program to benefit wealthy people instead of small lot owners. That this was completely untrue had no bearing on the matter. These two gentlemen were determined not to let the facts get in the way. Although not entertaining for me at the time, everyone else seemed to enjoy reading about this in the local newspapers. After the furor died



Citizens' first impression of the Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA): Stealing property rights in North Carolina

down, and things got back to normal, I enjoyed the realization that what these two had done was to solidify local support for my efforts. And I was always sure that the incident was in no way related to a previous episode in which my office denied the representative's request for a subdivision and impact fee exemption.

NINE

Elected officials have every right to hear rational explanations of various policy options and make what any planner would deem the wrong choice.

The planner's role is to analyze a situation, present alternatives, comment on advantages and disadvantages, and make a recommendation. The last is a privilege only. Shame on those and their processes that do not make or allow recommendations. We should not be accorded the luxury of presenting the facts without recommending a solution. I am comforted, however, that planners do not have the final say. If a poor choice is made, it is not the fault of the elected official. It is the professional's fault.

Planners too often hide behind the excuse that politics affected the outcome. It did. It always does. It always will. The resulting failure is because of the planner's inability to understand, activate, motivate and influence the political forces that caused the decision. This can be tough to do. Vision and foresight are hard to come by in the political arena. Ostriches, with their heads buried in the sand, show as much vision and bravery as many of our elected officials. If a planner thinks a contrary outcome is likely, she or he is obligated to make an effort to sway those actors. This will not happen during the final meeting before a public audience. A planner must be involved in this process at several levels. Depending on your skill, this may or may not affect your term of service. The only place this can be learned effectively is on the job, but some graduate coursework in the planning curriculum would be a good start.

In order to alter a primary sand dune under regulations implementing North Carolina's Coastal Area Management Act, a variance was needed from the gubernatorially appointed Coastal Resources Commission (CRC). It so happened that one of the more diligent localities stopped a prominent contractor from completing such an alteration without a permit. The staff argument about precedents being set if the regulation were not followed and supporting the local permit officer carried little weight. The case was heard, and the variance was granted by a wide margin. We blamed it on politics; however, it was our fault that the case was lost. We did nothing to help the CRC deny the variance. In fact, we made it hard by relying on it to do the right thing. The right thing would have been for us to have local and state testi-

mony opposing the variance. We mistakenly did not think that was our job.

TEN

In public planning agencies, elected and appointed officials should be involved and aware of personnel and administrative decisions made by planning managers.

Members of planning commissions, zoning boards, and other appointed and elected bodies, have a vested interest in their planning operations, especially as this relates to staff quality and continuity. Management is one of the profession's most difficult responsibilities, and there is always room for improvement. Personnel decisions in particular can have a tremendous impact on staff morale and public perceptions. I can easily count the number of personnel management courses I had while in school. No one told me that running an agency of 45 employees is something very different from a 45-person office in a large state bureaucracy. I had no courses in employee motivation, influence peddling, budget analyses, personnel management, and similar business related matters. And no one told me that in an agency of this size, more than one-third of my time could be consumed by personnel matters. Suggestions on such items are another area where comments from the outside are typically considered intrusions. But elected and appointed officials usually have one or more members with business backgrounds that can be effectively used to help. Most jurisdictions have policies and ordinances that prevent blatant interference. Be careful that you are not seen as favoring one individual's input over another if you choose this option. In most cases, you will be better served by going outside your system entirely so that any charges of favoritism or influence can be handled.

I worked for an agency that had a 75 percent turnover rate in one year. The three-year average approached 50 percent. Its administrative operations were totally the domain of the executive director, except for adoption of the annual budget. Although staff promotions were announced to our council, it had no opportunity to observe the process used to grant, or deny, such promotions. No council member ever interviewed for replacement personnel or spoke with staff choosing to leave. The explanation always given the council was that most of the turnover involved entry level people, and that such turnover was to be expected. A turnover rate this high should be expected of an agency that shows little regard for its employees. It always should be expected of any agency that allows an executive director total control over personnel matters. Whether a board of directors is appointed or elected, it must know enough about its chief executive officer to monitor a situation and step in if need be. ■