Barriers to Effective Participation in Community Land Use Planning and Solutions in Community-based Research

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Nearly sixty percent of the land in most Canadian towns and cities is developed for private purposes, for both residential and commercial activities (Hodge 1991). Land use issues dominate the agendas of municipal councils. Community members face many barriers in participating in land use planning. The underlying philosophy and practices of community-based research have the potential to empower local community members and help to give them a stronger voice in determining their collective future.

This paper analyzes some of the barriers facing effective participation in community land use planning as well as the possibilities for reform by drawing upon community-based research approaches. The first part of this paper outlines necessary background on community land use planning. The second part introduces the field of community-based research and discusses its application to community land use planning, using the municipality of Tofino, British Columbia as an illustrative example.

Community Land Use Planning

To fully understand the possibilities for effective participation in community land use planning, some knowledge of the procedures involved is necessary. Typically, the process of applying for a variance from zoning regulations or for appealing for amendments to the community plan or zoning by-law is initiated by a landowner through an application to the appeal committee. Other landowners in the same area, usually within a hundred meter radius, are advised of the application and of their ability to make submissions before a committee at a scheduled hearing date. An initial hearing is held to decide on whether or not to allow the appeal. This planning process is largely judicial in nature (Hodge 1991).

Any proposal that would require significant amendments to existing planning policy receives technical scrutiny by the planning staff and other officials, a public hearing to receive public input, debate by the municipal council, and final approval by the province (Hodge 1991). The process of amending a plan or by-law is initiated by someone external to government, usually the developer. The primary purpose of zoning regulations has been to protect neighborhoods and communities in the face of urban expansion.

In analyzing the motivations behind municipal decision-making, it needs to be recognized that the government is not a single entity with altruistic motivations. Any analysis into municipal decisions must take into account the incentives available to policy makers, especially in circumstances where the public interest may conflict with the policy maker's personal interests (Holcombe 1995). Beyond the personal interests of municipal politicians, however, are many other factors that help to determine the effectiveness of community participation in land use planning.

By the beginning of the 20th century, many local governments seemed unable to cope with the increased demands stemming from a growing population in Canadian cities. A municipal reform movement arose largely from the business community, as it was their interests that were directly affected by municipal incompetence. They argued that municipal governments should be

primarily about providing services that were both efficient and economical. The most significant outcome of this reform movement was that municipal councils came to be seen as more of an administrative body, while the idea of the municipality as a forum for political debate has been largely neglected (Hodge 1991). The pressures facing municipal governments, especially financial restraints, have led to an emphasis on municipal business plans, measurable targets, and improved service to the public. Municipalities have slowly become mere vehicles of service delivery. Even this function is being eroded as alternative delivery options and public-private partnerships are predominantly viewed as more economical (Tindal 2004).

This reform movement has had an adverse effect on the quality of democracy in municipal politics as well as the ability of local people to effectively voice their vision for development. There is a difference between citizens and customers. Citizens have the right to be treated equitably. Consumers, on the other hand, are vulnerable to businesses that often differentiate, discriminate, and are prepared to do what is necessary to increase market shares or cut costs. This reform movement has led us to evaluate our governments not for their democratic performance, but for their ability to incorporate key aspects of private sector operations (Tindal 2004). The more recent emphasis on urban planning simply imposes one opinion of desirable land use planning on those who do not have the political power or the economic capacity to shape those opinions and objectives (Holcombe 1995).

The decisions of municipal councils are subject to many external variables. One of the most influential variables is the current economic system in which municipalities operate. The need to stimulate growth in order to maintain our capitalist economic system is played out in our cities. Local governments face heavy pressures to acquiesce to the demands of business for fear of losing them to other locations (Tindal 2004). Municipal politicians' ability to respond to community needs is greatly affected by this current economic climate.

Underlying our economic system are certain widely accepted ideals, which also largely influence municipal decision making. The privileging of the ideals of growth and progress, although increasingly questioned, remains pervasive. There are many scholars, however, that recognize that the promised benefits of growth have been greatly exaggerated and many projects designed to stimulate this growth have led cities into terrible fiscal problems (Logan 1987). Our local politicians, however, have a limited ability to act. They are faced with extreme hostility to any policy that cannot be shown to promote the overriding principle of growth.

In order to understand why these ideals have become so entrenched in our cities it is necessary to determine who benefits from the current system. The clear winners in our urban landscapes are members of the property development industry, which includes developers, financiers, real estate companies, construction companies, and property managers (Tindal 2004). Although land use conflicts have the potential to become the subject of intense debate throughout an entire community, the tendency in most cities is for those who do not directly participate in the land use market not to be involved in municipal politics. In other words, the professional workers such as doctors and teachers, the industrial workers, the homeless and the dispossessed as well as other low or middle class groups for all intents and purposes are disenfranchised when it comes to land use. For the most part, the people that use their time and money to participate in local affairs have the most to gain in land use decisions, i.e., the property development industry (Logan 1987).

The development industry derives power from its economic resources and its ability to act as an ally for those seeking policy change. A shared value system between developers and municipal politicians is attributable to the fact that those involved in trading land and real estate often run

for council, get appointed to planning boards, and practice extensive lobbying. Developers and other representatives of the business class tend to dominate municipal council meetings and it is their vision for community development that often gets adopted. As Hodge notes, "Since not all segments of the community are likely to participate, planning outcomes tend to favour the interest of the more powerful over those of the weak and disadvantaged" (Hodge 1991: 345).

The general public faces many barriers in protesting land use decisions. When the public files an objection they must be prepared for a legalistic setting and in some instances they may even be required to pay a fee. In many cases, lawyers need to be retained, limiting the appeals to those who can afford it. Due to this highly structured format, presentations that are not well organized tend to have little effect (Hodge 1991). Land use decisions reflect the fact that politicians are confronted daily by, "a business community that is well-organized, amply supplied with a number of deployable resources, and inclined to act on behalf of tangible and ambitious plans that are mutually beneficial" (Logan 1987: 62).

No matter how large or small, all community organizations have vulnerabilities. Even the most militant of associations can find their objectives shaped by an environment that reinforces established norms. By their very nature, community organizations are not designed to make money and often struggle for the funds to survive. Community organizations are also prone to becoming alternative service providers in the face of heavy government cutbacks, losing their transformative focus (Logan 1987).

Resort Communities such as Tofino, B.C. are witness to some of the more passionate and emotional elements of land use planning. This unique natural setting on the west coast of Vancouver Island serves to greatly increase land values and the conflicts that surround them. It is this uniqueness that makes the sky the limit on rent levels (Logan 1987). In these resort communities, the attractiveness of the location inevitably leads to more cosmopolitan investors increasingly replacing local renters. Cosmopolitan capital, local investors, and affluent residents combine to produce the highest rates of housing price inflation. Typically, increases in housing prices are due in these areas to land cost increases, not construction cost increases (Logan 1987).

Housing attainability is a challenge for many Tofino residents, particularly those looking for long term leases or accommodation for seasonal employment. Housing costs in Tofino are significantly higher than the region's average as well as the provincial average. In addition, household income in Tofino is slightly less than the provincial average. The need for alternative lower cost housing options is apparent (District of Tofino 2002). It is here, where local residents are being priced out of their homes, that the need for effective participation in community land use planning is indisputable. It is because these land use decisions usually do not favour local residents that community organizations are formed by these local residents to sustain the places in which they live (Logan 1987). Their frequent clash with those striving for higher rents results in urban conflict. The politics of place is largely about whose interests the government will serve.

Despite the many barriers facing community members in influencing the outcomes of land use decisions, a growing commitment from researchers and universities in highlighting the importance of community involvement in *research* offers possibilities for reform. It is through working with and for community groups that community-based research can serve to increase the effectiveness of local participation in community land use planning. Ansley notes: "Research on scientific, economic, social, and other issues is essential to framing public policy and contributing to public discourse" (Ansley 1997: 46).

Community-based Research

Community-based Research is a term that has come to mean many things to many different people and now exists as an important alternative to more conventional approaches to research (Ansley 1997). Some researchers may consider themselves to be doing community-based research simply because their research takes place with a community. Other researchers consider gathering information from community members to be community-based research. Still others believe that community-based research necessarily entails equal participation between researchers and community members. The type of community-based research advocated for in this paper, however, goes beyond mere inclusion of community voices in research to promoting and enabling community control over the research process itself. This form of research examines closely the social environment and holds local knowledge as a primary empirical focus. More important to the goal of effective community participation, is an emphasis on fostering individual and community empowerment, motivation, and solidarity (Fischer 2000).

Community-based or participatory research is the product of the work of intellectuals, activists and progressive professionals and the "new social movements" identified most strongly with Third World communities. These social movements are representative of the contemporary struggle for participatory democracy (Fischer 2000). At the heart of the problem is the classic tension between expertise and participation. A careful balance must be stuck between the importance of empirical scientific knowledge and the knowledge that comes from direct experience in a particular environment. Community-based research holds the promotion of democracy as one of its central tenants.

The philosophical underpinnings of community-based research overtly acknowledge the link between knowledge and power. "Participatory research must attempt to shift the balance of power by involving the powerless in generating their own knowledge" (St. Denis 1992: 55). When individuals are understood within their own sociocultural context instead of being thrown into the legalistic jargon that pervades most municipal council meetings, their message actually has a chance of being heard. The creation of both intellectual and institutional conditions that allow a community to pose questions in its everyday language and to determine the issues important to them would greatly serve to improve the quality of local democracy (Fischer 2000). Our devotion to technical analysis creates a system wherein certain values and goals, such as the promotion of growth, are taken as a given. Community-based research exists as a challenge to this singular type of knowledge system. An elimination of the professional's commitment to the superiority of technical solutions would allow for a greater role for community members in municipal land use decisions. (Fischer 2000).

Researchers may also have access to funding that can directly or indirectly help support struggling community organizations to achieve their community aims. While research funds tend not to be able to contribute to core operating costs, research into the area of concern of the organizations may help their cause. Access to research funds, much more readily available to the academic community, has the ability to reshape priorities and power relationships. As part of community-based research, the goal of ongoing capacity-building often results in training, better infrastructure, and data collection for local communities (Macaulay 1999). By gaining control of information, local communities can gain influence over the decisions that affect their lives (St. Denis 1992).

Community-based research has always included a strategy for enlightenment and consciousness-raising amongst citizens with common interests and concerns. There is an inherent social learning function in community-based research. This research has the potential to serve an important democratic function through increasing community awareness of important issues relating to land use as well as developing analytical and critical capacities (Fischer 2000). Instead of community members simply communicating what they know to researchers, this alternative research approach encourages participants to begin theorizing about what they know and creating their own meanings (St. Denis 1992). Instead of serving as passive recipients of knowledge, community-based research encourages active and participatory learning. By taking back control of local knowledge, community-based research helps communities to articulate an acceptable vision of the future of land use in the area.

A common theme running throughout much of the literature on community-based research is that of an acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity. Communities do not speak with one voice and do not all share a common vision of the future. Researchers are advised to involve and collaborate with as many people as possible and to make use of diverse groups within the community (St. Denis 1992). It is through this acknowledgement of diversity that community-based research is seen by many as being well suited to dealing with more messy and less clear cut policy areas (Fischer 2000). Competing rights and values, present in a democracy, are acknowledged by these alternative researchers; and the processes that they advocate are designed to accommodate these conflicts (Ansley 1997). Although community-based research is often criticized for creating ambiguous results, at its best it produces competing explanations of multiple realities experienced by different community members (St. Denis 1992).

Tofino is an example of a community where little consensus on priorities exist. Some residents emphasize the need for economic growth and clearcut logging of the region. Others are deeply concerned about the overexpansion of tourism in the area, alternative economic development, and justice for Native peoples (Shaw 2003). Passionate disagreement is a sign of a functioning democracy; community-based researchers are prepared for this conflict. This stance is clearly oppositional in nature to the bureaucratic, administrative bodies that our municipal governments have become. Acceptance and accommodation of conflict and diversity in municipal land use planning, in following the models set forth by community-based research, would go a long way in improving the effectiveness of local participation (Ansley 1997).

In many ways, community-based research has the potential to empower local communities in influencing land use decisions. Through community-based research, alternative approaches to research have been developed that increase the participation of the poor in rural and urban communities as well as improving their standard of living. Community-based research can function to create a sense of solidarity and power and to provide new knowledge about how power is maintained and challenged (Fischer 2000). Community-based research removes barriers and creates environments conducive to capacity-building (Macaulay 1999).

Those involved in community-based research, especially those advocating action research and participatory action research, often see integrating scientific investigation with education and political action as key to their work. Through community-based research, action is made possible on critical issues that otherwise may have been neglected by the community. This form of collaborative research demands that knowledge be useful (Fischer 2000).

Relevance is thought to be one of the most important elements of community-based research. If the research that is being conducted cannot be directly linked to some tangible benefits to the local community, careful consideration should be given to its desirability. Community-based

research requires a merging of theory and practice. More abstract, educational aspects of research must be combined with concrete action on the ground. People want to know how their participation will be practically and concretely helpful or useful. This is true both in research and in municipal politics (St. Denis 1992).

Community members face many barriers in participating in land use planning. It may be through the philosophies and practices of community-based research that the potential for empowerment of local community members is realized. By analyzing some of the specific barriers to participation and the context in which municipal land use decisions take place, the vibrancy of our local democracies can be seen as questionable. Drawing upon practices and philosophies of community-based research, particularly participatory action research, and the adherence to capacity building and empowerment of local communities, lies the possibility of reform.

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