

# Smart Growth Tactics

## Partnerships for creating inclusive and successful communities

By Mandy Grewal, Ph.D.

### An essay on inclusion & justice

This essay argues for creating and strengthening partnerships between planners and those who hold public office in their districts for the purpose of ensuring equitable, effective, and sustainable public policies. Both groups have an overarching goal in common: work toward ensuring the success of communities from a multi-tiered perspective of economic, environmental, and social justice

Public officials attempt to ensure the availability of sufficient public funds for social services, education, and other amenities on the one hand and a stable economic base for their communities on the other hand. The central question for them often is: how to strengthen neighborhoods and communities to withstand economic and social changes? Planners attempt to address sprawl and other land-use challenges on the one hand and the increased competition between communities for ensuring a strong tax-base on the other hand. The central question facing them often is: how to plan for local and regional spaces that are multi-faceted with respect to land-use, transportation, and housing?

Insofar as both groups are vested in ensuring the economic, social, and environmental success of communities this article puts forth the idea of a socio-political policy-making process. Strong partnerships between politicians and planners are required to envision and eventually create successful communities and race, income, and gender issues must be specifically accounted for in order to ensure equitable, effective, and sustainable public policies

### Planning & equity

Even though planning has its roots in modernist and patriarchal grand narratives that exclude certain groups (on the basis of race, gender, and income), there is a growing awareness of the need for more inclusionary planning thought and practice. In an article titled "Feminist Theory and Planning Theory: The Epistemological Linkages," the authors highlight the issue when calling for developing a "theory and practice of 'planning for multiple publics,' at the center of which is an acknowledgement and celebration of difference."<sup>1</sup> There are multiple threads within planning that validate the need for greater inclusion. In regards to planning theory, there are, among others, advocacy planning, equity planning, and communicative planning

Advocacy planning assumes planners, through their expertise, are in a



**Creation of sustainable successful communities requires a socio-political response that is equally institutionalized. Successful communities, at the local, regional, and state level occur when all players – community members, local and state politicians, and planners – are on the same page and equally committed to the process.**

position to empower local communities that may otherwise be overpowered by powerful interest groups. Equity planning acknowledges that planners alone cannot bring about change but what planners can do is highlight the needs of the marginalized by developing 'mutually beneficial' relationships with the media and by being politically-savvy educators of not just decision makers but also the public. Communicative planning outlines the specifics of how this education can occur via planners acquiring, parsing, and presenting information wherein they are assumed to be neutral knowledge mediators and brokers

Within planning practice there has been a focus on addressing the unequal access to and distribution of resources and services. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a trend, within cities such as Cleveland, Boston, and San Francisco, of addressing social justice issues by their city planning departments. The results were isolated examples of city plans and policies, led by such planners as Norman Krumholz, which diverged from the downtown-oriented land-use planning tradition of most U.S. cities. Equity was envisioned, primarily using neighborhood planning, as more choices and improved access for marginalized groups to resources such as housing and services such as transportation.

In linking the different planning threads, neighborhood planning focuses on community-based neighborhood-level physical improvements in the context of community organizing and empowerment. By comparison, advocacy and equity planning focus on the role of the planner in neighborhood planning processes.<sup>2</sup>

There is general consensus that in the pursuit of inclusionary planning practices, it is important to create linkages between media, government agencies, grassroots organizations, and planners. However, the role of politicians has not been specifically examined, even as the political nature of planning and policymaking has often been elaborated upon.

## Successful cases

There is literature documenting the negative impacts of modernist planning practices in the socio-economic lives of Americans.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence of how predominant land use planning decisions of the 1970s and 1980s created racially divided neighborhoods,<sup>4</sup> public spaces demarcated on the basis of income,<sup>5</sup> and generally disregarded the specific needs of women.<sup>6</sup> Efforts in the field of environmental justice exemplify the inter-linkages between land use and public policy.<sup>7</sup> Evidence reveals

how certain policies disproportionately expose marginalized groups to greater health and environmental risks in addition to the lengthy delays in siting environmental amenities in urban neighborhoods.

There is, then, an understanding that “the wealthy disproportionately benefit from the distribution of transportation services, upper-income communities are more likely to have access to healthier food choices, and policing strategies in communities of color aim to keep people under control rather than protect them from crime”<sup>8</sup>

Such institutionalized disparities necessitate an institutionalized response to closing the gaps in access to services, and economic opportunities on the basis of race, gender, and income. Creation of sustainable successful communities requires a socio-political response that is equally institutionalized.

In other words, effective partnerships between politicians and planners, where both groups are committed to the ideals of equal access and distribution are required. There are successful outcomes in the isolated cases where planners and public officials have developed partnerships, either on their own or on the urging of others, for the benefit of a given community.

J. Jennings outlines the process of developing and implementing the Roxbury Master Plan in Boston wherein residents lobbied city government and politicians to implement a revitalization strategy that substituted the interests of large businesses, as was previously the norm, with the interests of community residents.<sup>9</sup> In this case, residents fought against a proposed large biotechnology project and advocated for “a different set of priorities: affordable housing, clean and safe parks, physical enhancements to assist small businesses, quality and affordable child-care programs and facilities, and jobs paying living wages for residents”<sup>10</sup> The eventual success of the project demonstrates what can occur

when low-income or other marginalized communities actively lobby for and engage policy makers and planners.

Then there is the quintessential case of Cleveland documented by Norman Krumholz and John Forester (1990) wherein planners became advocates for the poor and working-class residents of the city in an effort to implement a ‘policies plan.’<sup>11</sup> Even though, initially, there was no political leadership for the initiative, the planners took it upon themselves to “shape agendas, nurture coalitions, and learn about the priorities and needs of other city actors” in order to put into place a revitalization process for the city that duly accounted for the needs of those on the margins.<sup>12</sup> This was achieved through an understanding that politicians, the media, and developers each had their own vulnerabilities and even though individually ‘powerful,’ they could be leveraged to push for equitable access to resources for their respective constituents.

Despite the success in Cleveland and other cities such as San Francisco and Chicago in practicing equity planning, it has remained the compartmentalized purview of such government departments as housing and community development rather than traditional planning agencies. Planners have never fully embraced the concept of equity, either conceptually or in practice. Some of the hesitation has to do with sparse documentary research as to how effectively equity concepts within planning translate into ‘successful’ outcomes.

Of the two cases referred to above, one relied on the community and the other on the planners to take the lead in advocating for addressing racial and economic divides. However, if we are looking for ‘successful outcomes,’ such efforts must be much more deliberative and collaborative. Successful communities, at the local, regional, and state level occur when all players – community members, local and state politicians, and planners – are on the

# Communicative planning in Washtenaw County

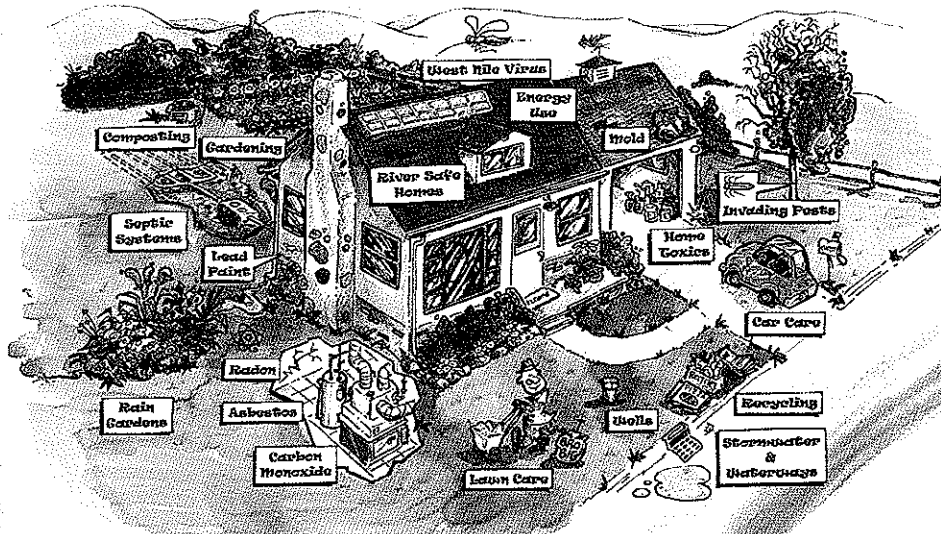
Washtenaw County can tout many cases of partnerships between county planners and county political leadership. The intensity of these partnerships vary from being limited to purely financial support by the Board of Commissioners to projects where the political leadership envisions a program and works with planners to implement it.

Even so, the need to move beyond case-based success stories to formalizing a process that embodies inclusiveness remains unaddressed. Even though Washtenaw County has an excellent comprehensive plan, the debate is predominately centered on land-use issues. The idea of focusing discussions about service/program delivery and implementation around economic, environmental, and social justice – even as it pertains to the comprehensive plan (e.g., quality of life, housing, transportation, and brownfield redevelopment) – would be essential for moving toward an institutionalized response to inclusive resource allocation.

## WASHTENAW COUNTY'S ENVIRONMENTAL PORTAL

An example of advocacy planning is Washtenaw County's Environmental Portal. It is an example of a partnership between political leaders and planners to envision and implement new programs/services. For many years Washtenaw County has been giving out Environmental Excellence awards to community organizations for their leadership in environmental protection and for practicing environmentally sound behavior in the areas of water quality protection, waste reduction and recycling, and pollution prevention. At the award ceremonies in 2006, the author – as a

same page and equally committed to the process. The idea, then, is not to focus predominately on outcomes but more so on an institutionalized process that does not rely on individual groups or agencies to advocate for and initiate ad-hoc projects for a more equitable distribution of resources. Rather,



**The Environmental Portal is a partnership between political leaders and planners to envision and implement new programs and services.**

Washtenaw County Board of Commissioner – envisioned a service wherein county residents may have access to information on how to be environmentally conscious in their lives whether at work or at home.

This began a conversation with the county's Planning and Environment department. Together, the planning and political leadership defined a common vision for an environmental portal that would allow access to multiple layers of environmental information. Over time, a community cooperative was established which included the County Drain Commission, Environmental Health, and Information Technology personnel. The result is the Environmental Portal and accessible at <http://environment.ewashtenaw.org>

The missing element of community engagement is currently being addressed as team members of the project undertake various forms of outreach with the aim of understanding the needs of users and reflecting those in future versions of the Web site. The goal is to establish an information portal that is accessible through different formats to users across not just Washtenaw County and Michigan, but also the nation. The public engagement and outreach outcomes will dictate the future extent and content of the service.

an established process that begins by cultivating and institutionalizing socio-political collaborations for defining, and eventually achieving, economic, environmental, and social justice regardless of race, income, and gender is required to ensure the creation and sustainability of successful communities

## WIND POWER

Another example of communicative planning in Washtenaw County is the wind power project. It is yet example of a partnership between Washtenaw County planning and political leadership. In 2005, under the leadership of then County Commissioner Wesley Prater, the planning department began an extensive information gathering process. In April 2006, the board of commissioners directed the Department of Planning and Environment to study the potential of wind power in the county. This initiated community outreach efforts, building local partnerships, and understanding the issue vis-à-vis the local community.

The outcome from this 'community cooperative' was a recommendation to erect an 80 meter meteorological tower in a specific location in order to test wind speed and other criteria essential for understanding the potential for harnessing wind power in the county. The County Board of Commissioners approved funding for it in the summer of 2007. The results from this pilot will determine if and how the county proceeds on pursuing wind power as an alternative source of energy.

## Framework for socio-political partnerships

Listed below are specific steps planners and politicians can take, either individually

# West Willow neighborhood revitalization



**Ballin' in the Willow (BITW) is a free, eight week, 3-on-3 basketball tournament that was created for the young people of the West Willow community. Every summer West Willow Park is the battleground as they search for "The Best In The West."**

The West Willow neighborhood revitalization exemplifies neighborhood planning. West Willow is located in the north part of Ypsilanti Township directly west of Willow Run Airport and the GM Powertrain plant, and east of Downtown Ypsilanti. The neighborhood is bounded by I-94, US-12, and Ward Road. It faces numerous challenges including a negative perception, as crime, safety, and disinvestment concerns plague the neighborhood. Compared to the rest of Washtenaw County, it has three times the number of single parents and renting, not owning, is the norm. However, its major asset and strength are its residents and community networks.

The community has known for years what their challenges were, but with little political support, there was no will to make change. Over the years, their attempts at planning for change have been noteworthy but eventually unsustainable. In the last couple of years, however, the community has devised and began implementing a strategic plan for the West Willow neighborhood. With the combined vision and partnership of County Commissioner Rolland Sizemore and Washtenaw County's Office of Community Development, the planning expertise and political will helped to define a strategic plan for West Willow's revitalization. A large team of players that comprised the 'community cooperative' include Ypsilanti Township, Washtenaw County's employment and community services department, Office of

the Sheriff, Washtenaw County's Children's Services, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission, Growing Hope, Washtenaw County Road Commission, the Willow Run and Van Buren School Districts, local faith based organizations, hundreds of local residents – and more!

The strategic plan that the political and planning leadership helped design and which the community endorsed has three focus areas Parks & Recreation/Youth, Housing/Physical, and Safety.

One of the programs under the first category of parks and recreation/youth is Ballin' in the Willow (<http://ballininthewillow.com/>). It is a free, eight week, 3-on-3 basketball tournament that was created for the young people of the West Willow community. During the 2007 season 102 young people from the West Willow neighborhood participated in over 250 games.

Even as there are examples of success – in communities across the state and nation – through advocacy, communicative, and neighborhood planning the need for a socio-political policy-making process remains. As noted earlier, collaborations between politicians and planners that institutionalize an inclusive decision-making process are essential to create a sustainable, high quality of life for neighborhoods, communities, regions, and states.

or as partners, to put forth their vision for ensuring success along economic, environmental, and social justice dimensions in their communities. These steps help ensure that neighborhoods and communities are able to withstand the flux of economic and social change as they provide for: (a) multi-generational, multi-income housing; (b) access to multiple modes of transportation; and (c) small and large businesses that are service-oriented, manufacturing, knowledge-based, and agri-based.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH**

Planners and politicians, acting as partners in the process, need to engage with constituents to understand their needs and perspectives. It is only when they take the time to listen and understand the needs of community members, especially those on the margins, will they be able to devise and politically defend plans that are equitable and ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of projects and services. This, in turn, would require politicians and planners to make deliberate efforts to reach out to their constituents, with particular attention to those being marginalized on the basis of race, income, or gender. For planners, this may mean conducting surveys to obtain inclusive public opinion, attending city council meetings, and participating in neighborhood meetings. For politicians it may translate to attending school events in largely immigrant and/or low-income communities, and holding community engagement events.

## **COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY**

Politicians and planners must, in a coordinated and cohesive manner, engage the local and regional media – newspapers, radio, internet, television – to communicate the issues and concerns of all constituents. It is essential that this is undertaken on a regular basis so as to cultivate media relationships and ensure that all stakeholders are informed on when and how policies are implemented on such community-wide issues as road expansions, downtown revitalization, and

economic development. It is also a critical tool for public engagement and outreach.

Given their professional expertise, the onus to spearhead the above-noted public engagement and outreach, along with communication and advocacy, would most likely fall upon the planner. Planners are trained to analyze issues from a multi-dimensional lens with attention to land-use, environmental, economic, and community perspectives. They can further the socio-political process by creating partnerships with local and regional political leaders and forming community-based cooperatives.

The idea behind a community cooperative is to have inter-agency representation, which is led by the city or county planning office and appropriate political representatives. These cooperatives would analyze a new project on its merits with respect to such variables as density, traffic,

public transit, drainage, brownfields, job retention/attraction, investment in local charities, impact on local businesses, and (re)distribution of resources. The cooperatives would be formed with representation from multiple agencies, including human services, community development, road commission, youth, senior citizen groups, education sector, public and private developers, public health, community-based funding agencies, public safety and justice, nonprofits, and environmental groups. They could then assist in compiling a comprehensive report with specific recommendations that are mandated before approving any development or resource allocation for new programs/services or review the efficiency of existing programs/services. During the deliberation and implementation stages, the planning and political leadership would undertake the outreach and advocacy elements.

The illustration below outlines how the process might be undertaken. It begins with the appropriate planning and political leadership individuals and/or bodies outlining a vision for their communities. This is, then, followed by each group, either independently or together, engaging and communicating with both the community at large and with organizations/groups comprising the 'community cooperative.'

The 'community cooperative', which is the pulse of the community, works to identify short-term goals and outcomes that are aligned with the outlined vision for the community. Once identified, these recommendations would be forwarded to the planning and political leadership to ensure their adherence to the comprehensive plan and for political/financial support, respectively. Implementation would occur through appropriate agencies. Evaluation criterion and 'successful outcomes' would be essential for obtaining future funding of the program/service.

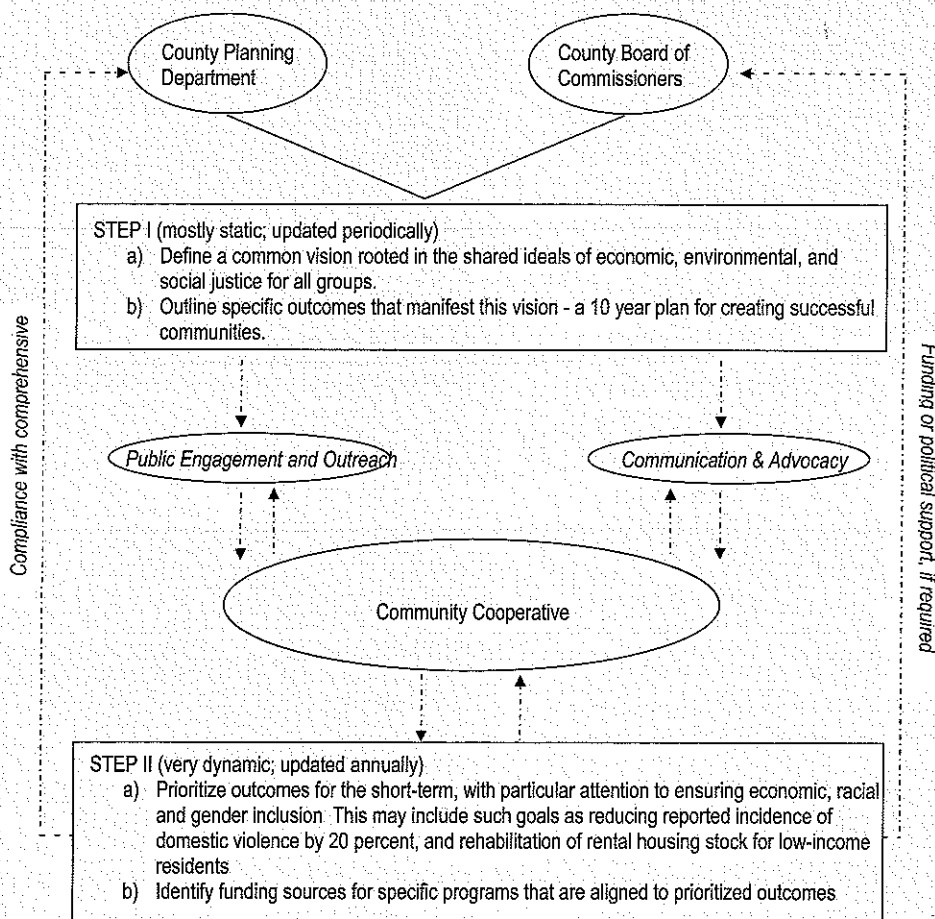
## Challenges to socio-political partnerships

There are many recognized challenges to socio-political partnerships.

### RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Most public and nonprofit agencies, including planning departments, are usually strapped for resources. It is challenging enough for them to accomplish mandated tasks. The resources required to lead or participate in a community collaborative with no immediate, short-term or tangible, obvious gains/outcomes may be very difficult to identify and justify. The morality and social justice may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to encourage the participation of planners and public officials, not to mention community agencies.

## Community cooperative process



## EXISTING POWER HIERARCHIES

In a typical social scenario, those who hold power (financial, political, social, or other) are those who are vested in retaining the status quo. There is an inherent belief that changing the status quo would impact them negatively and when there is no overarching need or incentive to change, it is not likely to occur. In the absence of pressure from either the leadership or disenfranchised groups (who are typically not well organized or informed), change is least likely to occur.

As such, it is the responsibility of socio-political leaders to cultivate an institutionalized culture of nurturing partnerships for ensuring inclusiveness and adhering to a common vision of economic, environmental and social justice for their communities.

## POPULIST POLITICAL AGENDAS

As mentioned, marginalized groups have little political clout and, typically, low levels of political participation. On the other end, public officials are deeply vested in catering to those constituents that have higher political participation rates. Those groups tend to be economically and socially powerful, such as developers and labor unions. Thus, the agendas that receive the most attention and resources are those that are geared toward addressing the needs of these groups or projects that are likely to bring greatest political returns to those controlling the distribution of resources. Consequently, a lot of public policies are made on the basis of short-term gain rather than along the lines of adhering to a (usually absent) common vision of economic, environmental and social justice.

## PLANNERS APATHY

It is not just politicians but planners as well that are unwilling to make an investment in cultivating an institutionalized culture of nurturing community partnerships. Even those

threads within planning that promote public engagement and outreach, including advocacy, equity, and neighborhood planning, retain the central role of planner as an expert.<sup>13</sup> Even though theoretical elaborations on the power/knowledge nexus exist within planning, there is no framework to capture contextual, localized ways in which this translates to the everyday lives of the public and decision-makers.

In order to achieve this, planners and politicians must be willing and able (through access to resources and political capital) to create and implement the common vision of economic, environmental and social justice for their communities.

## Conclusion

It is clear that politicians and, especially planners, are unable to move toward socio-political change on their own. Creating partnerships strengthens the ability of both planners and politicians to move their communities toward a mutually defined and beneficial future that provides economic, environmental, and social justice to all groups. To achieve the desired inclusiveness for process and outcomes, this partnership has to be rooted in shared ideals of upholding the rights of those on the margins of existing power hierarchies because of their race, income, or gender.

There has to be an understanding within the socio-political leadership, and eventually the community, of the inter-connectedness of people and resources. Even though capital and labor are extremely mobile in our globalized reality, the essentiality of space remains critical. In the end, it remains about the quality of life or what has been referred to herein as successful communities: access to adequate housing, multiple

modes of transportation, and rich and diverse socio-cultural spaces.

As noted in the introduction, both planners and politicians are vested in the creation of successful communities that ensure the economic viability of regional communities, inter-linked socially and economically, and rooted in localized pride of place that are, then, most able to withstand challenges to their future viability.

It is only when we are able to institutionalize community cooperatives or similar inclusive processes to achieve a shared, common vision of community success that we will be able to move beyond case-based, incremental advancements to a systematic, structural change in the way resources are allocated and power exercised.

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## Notes

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