11.601 Introduction to Environmental Policy and Planning
Fall 2005

December 15, 2005

what did we learn this semester?

Chris

Seems a fitting time to reflect on the most important points we learned this semester, other than Xav likes assigning too much work.

Here's my quick, completely subjective list. Since 11.601 and Judy's class seem integrally related, it's basically a synthesis of my EPGiculum.

-Values are ESSENTIAL. They inspire you to do the work you do, sustain you in that work, and protect you from critique. And they do the same to others. Larry and Judy both hammered on this point many times.

-Knowing how you move people and either shift or resonate with their values is a huge part of enviro planning. Being able to articulate your views, help people clearly express theirs, point out inconsistencies of some values or actions with other values, finding solutions acceptable to divergent value systems, couching technoscientific information in value-relevant and -understandable terms are vital to our success.

-Planning is a heinously messy, complicated, value laden, charged process. Drop your 3rd grade success criteria of a smiley face and 100%, and learn to adopt the "no death threats" success metric.

-On a related note, there's never a "right" technoscientific answer. Truth is always debatable. Sometimes this is because of legitimate disagreement, sometimes this is because people skew results, sometimes because they inflate trivial uncertainties or flaws into "unsound science". Planners must find ways of dealing with different perceptions and methodologies, both in interpreting the "correct" story to serve as an internal reference point, and in communicating and mediating viewpoints in planning processes.

-Culture matters. It's not simply a matter of being "right", you have to be culturally relevant. Otherwise, in the words of Bruce Babbitt, you'll just be one of the people making big plans that gather dust on the shelf.

-On a related note, institutions and arrangements matter. Partially this is an institutional culture thing. For example, many resource agencies have long been driven by resource exploiters, even though they know have environment as one of their putative management objectives. Clearly, some objectives are interpreted to be more important than others. Institutions also matter by providing different incentive structures - planners MUST work with that for their own careers as well as when engaging the public, stakeholders, regulators, etc.

Any more key items?

December 14, 2005

What planners can learn from programmers

Bomee

programming languages are not just technology, but what programmers think in. They're half technology and half religion.

I was having a conversation with a former co-worker from my previous incarnation as an Internet application developer. My friend, writing from 13 hours in the future in Japan, and I were discussing why it was that our bookmark storage dot-com failed whereas companies like de.licios.us (an example of something known to us, Web 1.0 failures, as Web 2.0) that do the same darned thing are now successful. Now, you're thinking "Bomee, what does this have to do with environmental planning -- maybe you should cut back on the Benedryl". I have a point, really. My point is that the tools you use shape your thoughts. With that in mind, I offer you this essay by Paul Graham, the founder of the software company that created Yahoo Shops, as my parting thought on the issue of the role of environmental planners.

December 12, 2005

Environmental Arm Candy

Lori

Interesting to read Laura's post because after class I told Bomee the same thing - that I wished Jim Hamilton had spoken before the memo was due. Jim's talk was very thought-provoking and relevant to many of the class discussions we have had, and on many different levels.

Two of Jim's points resonated most strongly. First, "Do you throw grenades from outside the fence, or do you go inside? I think inside the fence is where the action is." "Inside the fence" is where Jim sees the opportunity to be at the table where decisions are being made. Most of the situations we've discussed in class involved a public sector agency's involvement in a planning decision. Jim described many situations, however, that involve private sector actors. Corporate decision-makers can keep much of their decision making to themselves. So CLF does, indeed, get an opportunity to serve as a change agent in a way other public and civil society actors cannot. This puts CLF in a unique position to advocate that maximum social benefits are derived. "Environmental arm candy"? That charge is understandable. It will stick if CLF proves ineffective in achieving results that protect and enhance the environment.

The second point Jim made that resonated with me was, "The power dynamic is something to pay close attention to. In one way, you are all about change and many people are not going to like that." This ties into Judy's talk about politics and her comment that "to be a good planner, you have to understand how the world works." Corporations do, in fact, hold significant power in shaping environmental outcomes. Corporations also have their own politics, inside and outside the corporate structure. A change agent has the opportunity to be effective at the table if he/she is savvy enough to gain access, assess the power dynamic, determine how decisions are made within that corporation, and set out to affect positive outcomes.

The common theme of the two points I highlighted is that each case involves serving as a change agent. There are different ways to create change. We must all seek our individual comfort zone, whether it's lobbing grenades from outside the fence or venturing inside. But we have to face the reality that no matter which approach we

take, there will be some people who won't like it. We have to learn how to deal with the competing opinions.

The Des Jardins book ends with a chapter called "Moral Pluralism -- Can we Ever Agree?" He postulates, "Perhaps we are asking too much when we seek clear, unambiguous, and certain decisions on ethical matters." He suggests, "We can think of the theories considered in this book as the carious tools we find in the doctor's repertoire. They are resources we can use to diagnose and treat environmental illnesses. Although no single one provides all the right answers, we need them all. A responsible citizen should be familiar with the values that each articulates, as well as with the limitations of each. This knowledge, along with important virtues such as courage, humility, and care may be the best we can hope for."

December 6, 2005

storytelling

Kate

I had this thought a few weeks earlier and forgot to post it, and I was reminded of it in class today. I think that one of the things Larry does very well is tell stories or create analogies to get his point across. He specifically mentioned that he does this a few weeks ago, and he had examples for nearly every class. I attended a communications training just before I left my job that was focused on just that, telling stories as the flat out best way to get ideas across - even complicated ideas full of numbers and statistics. People's brain's function such that they'll slot facts into the stories in their head, so advocates need to learn how to construct compelling stories. I had some trouble following David in class today, but Larry's analogy of kids crossing the street helped. why do I post this now? program statement and memo-wise - how does storytelling become a competency and how do we learn it at MIT? it could be fun to find out ...

November 20, 2005

how are indicators successful?

Kate

I thought the environmental indicators idea was really interesting - then of course we had to get down to the nitty gritty of picking them. I think the key for the project coordinators would be to say up front - this project isn't going to radically affect people's lives. it may be a seed planted so a later idea takes root, it may raise awareness, but real change has to come from a more concerted campaign. once that assumption is made, you don't have to address every single issue possible, because obviously they are all pertinent, important issues we think people should care about, but they won't all fit on the front page. I think it would be great if they ran above the headline every day, but there would be a newness factor for a while, then people would get used to it. depending on how they're measured, what if it stays "good" for months, but is still far from ideal? still, it's worth trying for sure.

November 20, 2005

Education + Responsibility = Stewardship

Katherine

Tuesday's discussion reminded me of a presentation by a consultant and a conservation planner from a suburban water department at a conference that I recently attended. The planner wanted to understand behaviors that caused ppl to use too much water, so she hired the consultant to investigate this topic. The consultant convened a group of about 10 ppl selected from the highest 10% of water users in the town. Without telling them why they were selected (even when they asked), the consultant asked them all sorts of questions about water use and conservation. The citizens responded by spouting all of the suggestions that water departments typically send to customers, and many seemed to believe that they were actually examples of efficient water use to be emulated by others in the town.

Because the consultant never informed the citizens that they were selected because they were among the most wasteful users, they never never learned from their excess that they had room to improve. Further, they never had the opportunity to take responsibility for being inefficient and wasteful water users. Instead, many of them concluded that they were model users. Finally, the consultant lost an opportunity to really probe them on why they used so much water. Without explaining that she knew they used abnormal amounts of water, she could not

challenge them when they claimed to adhere to the town's suggestions to determine if they were lying to her, misinterpreting the information, or the suggestions were not effective.

So what does this have to do with the indicators? Someone suggested that the Globe should just run stories and not attempt to quantify or show changes in the indicators. However, without showing changes, we as citizens are never held responsible for our actions. We cannot tell if we are getting better or worse. Similar to when you do the readings for class, think you understand them, and suddenly realize you don't know the material as well as you'd like when it's time to take the exam, showing changes in indicator levels will allow citizens to better evaluate their actions. Yes, they can still blame their neighbors for being wasteful while they picture themselves as models of sustainability, but it's a start. Further, the stories can serve to translate the indicators into more day-to-day activities that citizens can better relate to themselves. Or, as Lori suggested, they could become school projects that end up informing parents as well as children.

Only through understanding our actions (via education) and taking responsibility for them can we become successful stewards of our natural resources.

November 20, 2005

Boston indicators

Lori

I really like Bethie's ideas about performing the indicators using a JFF strategy, thereby engaging the public. I think if that is the approach, the indicators selected will have to be very straightforward, not complex indices. I would suggest three environmental indicators (air, water, land), two economic indicators (unemployment and poverty rates), and two social (housing and public health). Of course, determining exactly what to measure will take more work, other than the unemployment and poverty rates.

The concept of deliberative polling also came to mind. In essence, a survey is performed, then the participants are presented with factual information on a topic, and a follow up survey is then conducted asking the same questions after the info

session. I've seen this methodology used in energy surveys because people frequently are not aware of costs and benefits of different resource options.

Another thought is that it would be interesting to do a high school project on indicators, having the teachers work with the students to develop the indicators as well as perform measurement, where feasible. I love the idea of the kids looking for the monthly results and discussing what they see with their parents.

The website for the Boston indicators project shows they've come up with many indicators we discussed, and more http://www.tbf.org/indicatorsProject/

They use the indicators to develop a "Civic Agenda" for Boston through 2030. It's clear once you look at what they've done, it is pretty comprehensive. But it's far to complex to result in an arrow on a newspaper. If the point is educating the general public on sustainability, a few understandable indicators will serve the purpose w/o losing people. After all, the stories will give life to what the arrows indicate.

November 20, 2005

joint indicator finding

Bethie

I think there was an inherent contradiction between Tuesday's indicator discussion and Thursday's joint fact finding discussion. Although we did not delve into the exact composition of the 50-person council, we did discuss how the intended goal of the indicators would be to create public awareness and how reducing controversy and maintaining credibility would be essential along the way. Seeing as a group of environmentally-oriented graduate students could not come to a consensus on seven appropriate indicators, it seems like any selected seven would become subject to severe criticism. Moreover, even if the general public miraculously agreed on the indicators, the science behind these indicators would surely come under fire.

Why not approach both the indicator selection and the data collection processes with a joint fact finding strategy? Bring together all sectors of a municipality to choose seven indicators would become a visioning and learning experience in and of itself. In many ways, selecting sustainability indicators is a form of long-term goal setting.

A community coming together to select seven priority goals, which would encompass additional sub-goals, could potentially be more powerful and meaningful than the use of the indicators themselves. Moreover, the impact of the indicators seems directly related to the community “buy-in” or ownership of these measurements, so the indicators should not be selected for them.

Similarly, the science used to inform these indicators will most likely be subject to intense debate. Since the intention of these indicators is to create awareness and dialogue, not conflict per se, the collection of scientific data must occur collaboratively. A bunch of experts producing a monthly statement about the state of Boston’s sustainability does not sound like a good strategy for the local environmental movement. Overall, I think the most benefit could come from focusing people and resources on working with municipalities on the first phase of the project.

November 16, 2005

Public Education! Raising awareness!

Victoria

Tuesday's class really inspired me. For me this course has given me the space to think about ways as a "planner" (in the disguise of an engineer) to create social change, so the discussion on Tuesday about sustainability indicators for public knowledge and awareness was particularly inspiring. At first, admittedly, monthly indicators for only a few minutes on TV and radio or few inches of newspaper space wouldn't seem like it could make much impact. On the other hand, how else can public awareness be raised, other than having people who are concerned about these issues to start talking about them or having these issues be taught in formal education?

In the discussion we raised the issue of indicators based on a set of scientific tests as opposed to indicators based on polling experts. I agree that having a set of scientific tests would be more compelling because if anyone disagrees with the information they can simply look to the tests and the methods, whereas disagreement with opinions or statements by experts would be more subject to more controversy. The support of a 50-person council would also provide greater scientific authority.

When I was brainstorming indicators in the first few minutes of class, I debated the balance between social and economic sustainability indicators compared to environmental sustainability indicators. It's hard to imagine that purely environmental indicators will "impact" the public, unless there is some larger conversion into deep ecologists. Although I personally think that the environment has value in and of itself, I doubt that the public shares this view, and in order for the indicators to have relevance, I think there must be some economic if not social component to each indicator. Thoughts?

November 14, 2005

Understanding the planner's role

Victoria

I found the last four chapters to be useful in showing me the general technical and "management" tools that he believes environmental planners should have a running knowledge of. Nevertheless, I found myself questioning how practical such knowledge was and how such knowledge or tools actually translated to real policy and planning decision processes. At times, although I am an engineer, I am wary of the technical specifications that engineers come up with to serve as benchmarks and standards. Although I believe that they are necessary, I think engineers lack the understanding of the processes necessary for the public to undergo in order to achieve such standards, such as the 40% canopy level. We have discussed this issue in class, and I have found class discussions helpful in placing the book's material in an appropriate policy context, one that takes into consideration various resource constraints and stakeholder concerns.

I also find myself more interested less in the engineering and technical tools that are available to planners, but more the nontechnical tools. In the chapter on Land Use and Groundwater, I was particularly interested in more detail on "nonregulatory measures" and "public education", how public education policies in the past have provided for greater groundwater protection. As we discussed in class, the planner has a multi-faceted role (or at least I think so), which includes the role of public educator, one who raises awareness of issues to build coalitions that will, ideally, push for institutional and political changes in the long-term. I think we've shown

through our discussions in class the importance of the planner as a collaborator and facilitator, so I appreciate the recent discussion on the planner as educator. I don't mean to go "deep ecologist" on everyone, but I do think that larger social changes in the ways that we live, use resources and pollute the world will depend on the way we raise future generations through our formal as well as informal educational systems. In Japan and Taiwan, I suspect that a large part of social changes, such as simple things like not littering, recycling, etc., began with promotion and participation in grade schools. The frequent inculcation to children of such environmental and health knowledge has created a citizenry that is more aware will in turn support the development of a generation of future leaders. It is a paradigm shift, but not an impossible one as long as recognize the value of education.

As I read the last four chapters as well as the prior chapters, in my mind I kept coming to the question of how the planner is different from the engineer. In particular, I found myself bringing up engineering design processes and models, specifically, those that I have learned in Amy Smith's D-Lab courses as well as Susan Murcott (Environmental Engineering). The focus on my engineering experience was been a participatory,iterative prototyping design process, with attention to the constraints in designing for developing communities. As a result, multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches are absolutely necessary with community partners, experts, community residents, and other stakeholders. I suspect that so-called "collaborative engineering design processes" are increasingly become recognized as an important paradigm in approaching particularly situations with great resource constraints and stakeholder voices.

November 13, 2005

Planner as Communicator

Bethie

As of this sunny Sunday morning in mid-November, I think environmental planners hold three main responsibilities:

1. Education: Environmental planners must educate stakeholders (from all three sectors), and help them better understand the relationships within their communities—how human actions affect the natural environment, how the natural

environment affects humans, and how natural systems function. Part of this education emphasizes the innovative options available to communities to promote healthier interactions within their ecosystems.
2. Facilitation: Environmental planners must facilitate the decision-making process to ensure that all affected stakeholders participate meaningfully and wield power, that all values and concerns receive proper representation, and that both direct and indirect environmental impacts are thoroughly considered. Part of this facilitation includes framing development decisions as opportunities to meet multiple needs, rather than situations were tradeoffs are inevitable.
3. Implementation/Maintenance: Environmental planners must serve a watchdog role as well. Whether it is making sure that private developers stick to their word about meeting standards or that community groups keep their promise to water new trees, the planner's commitment to high quality implementation and maintenance is essential. This persistence and oversight will be required for projects meet their desired goals, even when the above two roles are fulfilled and plans are based on informed, negotiated agreements.

Given these responsibilities, I believe that an environmental planner in training must refine his/her facilitation skills: community organizing, consensus-building, negotiation, advocacy, mediation, etc. However, in order to provide the most support to communities in process of making decisions about where they live, an environmental planner must also be well versed in the scientific components of both environmental problems and innovative solutions. Planners must serve as the liaison between the scientists/engineers and the public, so planners must be able to speak many languages. In all three responsibilities listed above, the planner serves as a communicator to multiple parties. On one hand, the planner promotes environmental literacy and values to all sectors of society. On the other hand, the planner serves as a translator of the many languages- business, politics, science, local relations- spoken at the decision-making table.

Simply connecting the interested parties to the appropriate scientific expert is not enough. Education, facilitation and implementation will all suffer if the planner does not have a confident background in the basic principles of environmental topics, such as non-point source pollution, groundwater hydrology, urban forestry, or wetlands services. When it comes to civic environmentalism, making science relevant and

accessible to the public is the key to engaging and empowering communities to make good decisions. This is the responsibility of the environmental planner.

November 7, 2005

Is consensus always good?

Jessica

I wonder if consensus is always the end goal of collaborative planning processes. In the scenarios we have been enacting over the course of the term there have always been several stakeholders, several with opposing viewpoints and sometimes with diametrically opposite values and interests that needed to be bridged. However, what happens in a situation in which there are no opposing viewpoints that would work in a collaborative process to develop an approach? For example, what about a situation in which developers seek to develop land, but for whatever reason there are no objections raised by any community or group. Does the lack of opposition an indicator that there is no ethical conflict to be addressed? Is opposition always necessary to come to a fair consensus and plan for development? I am most concerned about situations in which there will be or might be damage to the land, but there are no parties that disapprove, or in cases where proposed plans of action are not widely disclosed and hence there is a deficit of information available for anyone to object to. Specifically, I am concerned about how the role of the planner changes in situations like these, if it changes at all. It seems that the planner is widely considered to be a neutral party in the decision-making process, someone who facilitates dialogue in a constructive manner that optimizes benefits to all parties in a way that keeps the interests of the environment and social interests central in any decision. It seems that the only manner in which the planner can influence decision-making is in how he/she selects relevant stakeholders to participate in the dialogue, but in this case there are no stakeholders to defend opposing principles.

There is also the notion of time and future cost/benefit for any development plan to be considered. Is the only consideration at the table immediate benefit, or is that incomplete and foolish, given that the decisions made today will affect tomorrow as well? There could be a consensus made, but if the consensus reached does not deal with all aspects of the issue, or does them in such a way that is not truly satisfactory

for the long-term (or possibly even the short term), is it the planner's job to ensure that they are addressed? There is no guarantee that just because there is a balanced group of stakeholders at the table that a mutually beneficial and maximally optimal solution will be obtained. However, the basic conditions for collaborative process has been reached -- there was a discussion among stakeholders and there was a consensus reached. Is that enough, or is it also the responsibility of the planner to ensure more happens?

November 7, 2005

The planner and power

Jessica

Last week a portion of class was devoted to discussion of the ethical responsibilities of planners, particularly in what views they should respect and reflect in the process of planning. What was significant to me about this was what that train of discussion led to -- basically the implication that the planner is a facilitator rather than an actual decision-maker in the planning process. In the brief scenario presented and elaborated upon by Professor Susskind, the planner emerged as a figure to create an open space for fair, rational deliberation to occur that allowed for all stakeholders to have equal input in decision-making that would guide the development process.

While I agree that this approach to consensus-building and negotiation offers many benefits in fair decision-making, in many regards I think collaborative planning is still only an offshoot, albeit a clearly refined and vastly improved one, of pre-existing top-down planning paradigms rather than a true shift in the approach to planning, which is perhaps the reason for its flaws. Collaborative planning as described in class places great importance on creating a balanced and level playing field that regards all stakeholders involved to be equal and with equal capacity to influence the outcome and build a consensual approach that takes into consideration (even if there is no direct action on) all major interests and concerns. Herein lies the paradox -- in a planning process that places the highest importance on transparency and allowing all stakeholders to be involved in the process equally, the process still requires a central planner (or several) who makes many key decisions in the process that could greatly affect the outcome. Collaborative planning, unless I'm mistaken, I interpreted

to mean a process in which there would be no figures that could have undue power in influencing the decision-making process. However I feel that although we have spent a great deal of time discussing how to give different parties equal power (reducing the power of experts, corporations vs ordinary people), the planner is still left in a position of great power. Professor Susskind mentioned in passing that the planner could indirectly put his values and principles to work in the way that he/she selected stakeholders to participate in the collaborative decision-making process -- how can it then be said that collaborative planning truly brings the planning process to a more fair level? This quite obviously requires a great deal of trust that the planner does not have ulterior motives and has sound ethical principles. I suppose this is my problem -- is a process that assumes or hopes that the planner is a fair, decent person with the right motives at heart truly a paradigm for truly egalitarian and rational decision-making? I feel that a truly fair approach would be one in which there would be safeguards for all parties involved -- we speak a great deal about the ethical responsibilities of the planner, but an approach that truly reflected the value that all parties should have equal say should likewise have built-in safeguards against the planner allowing his/her personal values to influence the direction of the planning process in selecting what parties to bring to the table.

I am uncomfortable with the idea that it is the responsibility of the planner to be cognizant of and seek out stakeholders to bring to the table -- in essence, he/she gets to define and what stakes are involved and who the stakeholders are. I wonder if there is a way to allow a self-selection for stakeholders that doesn't rely so heavily on the values and understanding of one or even a small group of professionals.

November 7, 2005

Collaborative law?

Victoria

Recently I came upon the website of the Boston Law Collaborative a firm that practices so-called "collaborative law" to reduce the costs of litigation and increase client satisfaction of outcomes through dispute resolution, legal advice, multidisciplinary practices, consulting and training. A quick google search seemed to indicate that collaborative law was more for family disputes, but I wonder how the

gradient between litigation and collaboration as well as mediation/negotiation affects outcomes in the field of environmental planning.