Planning in Cleveland: Working the Advocacy-Equity Side of the Street

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I suppose most city planners have long since dismissed the question posed as the title of this session — "Can City Planning Survive?" Of course city planning and city planners can survive — and prosper as well. For the last two decades — at least — this society has handsomely rewarded planners with positions of prestige and financial security in return for our land use plans, our zoning ordinances and our increasingly shrill cries of alarm at the deepening urban crisis. When the local general fund has faltered in our support, Uncle Sam has hastened to sustain our income and status with 701 or Community Renewal Program grants.

The question, then, is not whether city planners can survive. Surely this profession will endure. But can individual members of this profession survive who cast before themselves the vision of a just society and then work seriously and meaningfully toward that goal? In other words, can advocacy planners survive?

For those interested in the answer to this question, I bring hesitant glad tidings and a glimmer of hope.

Three years ago I joined the administration of Mayor Carl B. Stokes as Planning Director, intent upon producing a general land use and public facilities plan for the City of Cleveland. In just a few short months, it became obvious to me and my staff that accomplishment of this traditional planning exercise would be irrelevant if not counter-productive. The elements of the urban crisis — personal and municipal poverty, racism, social alienation, crime, bad housing — cannot be directly, nor meaningfully, attacked with the city planner's traditional bag of tools.

We could have ignored this realization and plunged forward with an updated version of Cleveland's 1949 Land Use Plan. Instead, we began the first halting steps toward a new vision for Cleveland, new direction for our institutions, and a role for the planning agency worthy of our efforts and resources.

The vision was simple, but its ramifications were to be profound:

- that individuals choose their own goals, and the means to pursue those goals,
that institutions derive their legitimacy only insofar as they promote individual choice of goals and means,

that institutions serve individual goals most when they promote wider choices in decisions made by individuals, and that this must then be the primary goal of institutions, and

that, in a context of limited resources, first and priority attention must be given to the task of promoting wider choices for those individuals and groups who have few, if any, choices.

The planning agency's role would be to offer information, criticism and policy guidance to decision-makers consistent with this framework. The goal we chose to support placed us in a clear advocate position in favor of those who have few, or no, choices. We understand that its successful pursuit will require no less than a fundamental redistribution of income and power in our society. But such a goal is not utopian, it is not radical, nor is it altruistic or beneficent. It is a familiar goal, rooted in the egalitarian ideals of our birth and growth as a nation. It is, ultimately, a just goal; one that seeks a society where equity is at least as important as efficiency.

Our own dedication to this goal is essentially ideological; it rests on our commitment to equity as an ideal and the consequent belief that any step in the direction of the ideal is desirable. And, of course, attention to this goal led us away from the traditional policies and practices of planning agencies.

In particular, our operational framework and the new role we assumed to promote that framework, put the substantial capabilities of my staff in service to those who need planners, not in service to those who have planners.

not in service to local governments which employ land use controls to exclude low-income housing from our suburbs and harass development in our central cities,

not in service to private and public entrepreneurs who have used urban renewal to materially reduce the supply of low-cost housing in American cities at a cost of more than three billion dollars,

not in service to those whose "solution" to transportation problems is to propose increased mobility for those with regular access to a car at the expense of those with no car -- the poor, infirm, elderly and young,

and not in service to developers, banks and high-income taxpayers in search of tax-shelter who gratuitously develop and finance Section 236 housing where their financial interests are heavily served while the low-income family's
interests are only tenuously served -- all at startling cost to the public treasury.

in short, not in service to the "haves" of our society, but to the "have-nots."

The "haves" don't need planners. They simply use planners. Those who truly need planners, and the substantial talents planners possess, are those who are truly in need of everything -- the poor and powerless of our society.

But those who need planners are not the ones who pay for them. And most planners believe that advocacy planning is risky business, generating conflict with those powerful institutions and individuals with vested interest in the status quo. Sooner or later one has to eat. And every planner here knows the politics of agency survival. Those who pay for you can use you. Those who need you are second in line.

I do not wish to minimize this so-called "fact of life." I do want to reconsider this part of our conventional wisdom in light of my experiences in Cleveland for the past three years -- years spanning two administrations, one led by a black Democrat (Carl B. Stokes) the present led by a white Republican (Ralph J. Perk). During this time our agency has consistently worked the advocacy side of the street and, I believe, we have acquired greater influence, prestige and possibly even success with the passage of time.

Let me note at the outset, that in advocating minority interests through agency efforts, there are two levels of engagement. First, reasonable discharge of professional responsibilities requires that you understand the ramifications of proposals made by you or by others before your planning commissions. Be responsible to the goal of equity in your analysis of these proposals. Ask whether the clear benefits of these programs go to those most in need or those least in need. Ask whether those who are called upon to pay for these programs are those most able to pay or those least able to pay. And finally, make the results of these analyses available to the planning commission and the public at large, as well as to local decision-makers. This is surely a proper function of planning agencies. It may be castigated as divisive, or negative (and very often will be by the media) but it can never be wrong.

The second level of engagement requires much greater technical competence in economics and cost-benefit analysis as well as a good deal of political finesse. Once you understand that given proposals lead away from equity, design alternatives where the clear benefits of the alternative programs do go to those most in need, and where those least able to pay do not pay most of the costs. Then, use your institutional and political role in the community to argue for these programs before local and federal decision-makers.

The staff of the Cleveland City Planning Commission operates on both of these levels. In so doing, we have developed the role of the planner in
such a way as to be almost diametrically opposite to that envisaged in most formal conceptions of the planner's function. Rather than serving as technicians supplying data for the pre-existing preferences of policy-makers, we function whenever we can as advocates for our own vision. Some of our information and proposals are directed at the participants in political decision-making; much of it is directed through the media to the public at large. Some of it -- as in this paper -- is directed toward the profession. all of it is directed toward shaping the ends and means of others toward our own view.

My experiences in engaging at these two levels of advocacy have been sometimes exciting, sometimes frustrating, occasionally surprising. Let me touch on some examples and indicate several principles which are emerging and are of importance to our success and survival as an advocate agency.

First, decision-makers often make their decisions on the basis of appallingly limited information. In a few cases, this may be the level of information they want. In most cases, they want more information but cannot get it.

So there is a great demand for information among political decision-makers that is often unfulfilled. Those conditions give the suppliers of information considerable influence upon the decision. As it is said: 'In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.' Being clear about how any proposal affects the interests you are advocating, and placing that information in the hands of decision-makers with similar interests among their constituencies will lend great weight to your recommendation.

For example: a proposed interstate highway through the City of Cleveland promised great benefits in increased mobility for suburban residents at great cost to those in the path of that highway as well as to city taxpayers in general. An alternative, developed and advocated by the Planning Commission, is now being proposed by the City -- not only because the alternative minimizes displacement within the City, but because the devastation of the original proposal on a certain Roman Catholic parish was outlined in precise detail by our staff to an important local decision-maker. This relatively small bit of information offered to the right decision-maker at the right time was a crucial key in assuring some equity between the benefits to the suburbs and the costs to the City of the proposed highway.

In the same way, our staff analysis of Nixon's proposed Family Assistance Plan which contained recommended modifications to increase Cleveland's benefits received much local support. We took great pains to point out the benefits of such an income maintenance program to the non-poor; that is, how many of the support-payment dollars would end up in local cash registers. I am convinced this information contributed importantly to endorsement of the proposal by our Chamber of Commerce as well as the approval of some local officials and the consequent support of FAP via our U. S. Congressional delegation.
A second principal is of crucial importance to those who deal with large legislative bodies elected on an area basis such as wards. In Cleveland we have 33 councilmen, all elected on a ward basis.

Your constituency as represented by such a body will not remain solid. Rather, the forces arrayed against your proposals will shift in composition and size from issue to issue. This tends to discourage consistent majority opposition to your proposals, discouraging as well coalitions of legislators in favor of your quick departure from the local scene.

Again, let me use local illustrations: the City Planning Commission has consistently advocated public housing for low-income families throughout the City and in the suburbs as well. This position has been supported, by and large, by the councilmen from black wards and generally resisted by the councilmen from the white wards.

In another study, however, a routine staff evaluation of the capital needs of our municipal light plant led to the Planning Commission proposing the condemnation and acquisition of the private electric utility and the expansion of our small municipal power system into a city-wide network promising lower electric power rates. Our antagonists and protagonists in this issue are almost exactly flip-flopped from the public housing issue. Black councilmen, by and large, want to sell the municipal light plant to the private utility, not expand it. And the white councilmen most adamantly against public housing in their wards are most decidedly in favor of our proposal to expand the municipal power plant.

A third principle relates to the incremental nature of political decision-making. Public policy moves forward slowly and carefully rather than boldly. Decision-makers who wish to change policy, move very carefully with a sharp eye to the breadth of support and narrowness of opposition. Generally, they prefer to avoid committing themselves to large-scale programs promising future benefits, preferring feasibility in operational terms to "fit" in any grand designs. But, as reluctant as decision-makers are to decide on large issues whose implications are unclear, still they must decide.

In this situation, advisors with an informed point of view can exert influence considerably out of proportion to their numbers.

Mayor Stokes felt he should do something about 800 acres of city-owned and essentially vacant land in a suburban township. His idea was to sell off the land and use the proceeds for redevelopment and rehabilitation in the various neighborhoods of the City. We persuaded him to let us plan a new town on the site. In six months, the Planning Commission completed a development plan and feasibility analysis which promised new choices in housing for low and moderate income families of the City. It also promised the testing of new procedures for the delivery of essential public services, as well as $750,000 annually in lease revenues to be used in the City. The Mayor supported the proposal.
When the business community came forth recently to offer a proposal for a new jetport in Cleveland, the Administration of Mayor Perk was reluctant to support it because it was unclear how City interests were affected. The City Planning Commission quickly developed a 7-point list of conditions under which the City could enter into such an agreement. Included in the list were clear benefits to the City in the form of revenue flows and jobs for its unemployed citizens. The Mayor supported the proposal.

The Cleveland City Planning Commission has convinced both the Stokes and Perk administrations that transfer of our municipal bus and transit system should not take place without assurances that services to transit-dependent riders are improved, maintained and subsidized. Both Mayors felt the need for attention to the needs of those whose mobility depends entirely on public transportation, but it was the staff of the Planning Commission which developed the conditions under which transfer of our municipal system will take place.

In the same way, we have successfully influenced the course of a study designed to produce a transit plan for our region. We have made it clear that we will fight the use of federal subsidies in mass transit for extensions of existing systems into suburban areas at the expense of improvements in service to the poor, elderly and infirm of the City.

A fourth principle is one which all of you can surely appreciate. Political decision-makers rarely harbor articulate, consistent objectives. For those of you who look to political leaders for objectives, this is a very decided problem. For those of us who have objectives for which we are seeking clients this is a decided opportunity.

Let me use another example to illustrate this point.

A state highway threatens to decimate two neighborhoods on the Cleveland's near west side -- displacing over a thousand low to middle-income families, removing millions of dollars from the assessed valuation rolls of the City, and burdening the City taxpayers with millions of dollars for their share of the construction costs. Again, the benefits of this highway would accrue largely to suburban residents in reducing the time and congestion of their journey to work.

The objectives of many political decision-makers in this matter were not articulated, but much general dissatisfaction was apparent. But the highway had been pending for ten years outlasting, in the process, several mayors and dozens of councilmen. The Planning Commission's objectives were to bring the relative costs and benefits of this highway into a more reasonable equilibrium. In so doing, the Commission provided a policy-framework which articulates the objectives and the time-frame which many political figures in two administrations both comprehend and support.

Briefly, the City Planning Commission has refused to approve this highway. Our decision rule for the approval of all future highway "improvements" is that the City and its residents are not left worse off after the "improvement" than before. Specifically, three conditions must be met:
1. The city will not be responsible for any share of the construction costs,

2. displaced families will be relocated in units they can afford which are built substantially out of highway funds, and

3. the State will make an annual payment to the City to reimburse it for all lost tax revenues as a result of clearance for the highway right-of-way.

Let me close by saying that I am beginning to think that all planning agencies in our older central cities should be, or will soon become, advocates for the "have-nots" of our society. Our moral commitment in Cleveland to what we have called "advocacy" is real. But striking a consistent stance in favor of the "have-nots" is becoming more and more a matter of simply providing appropriate service to a majority of the residents in our older central cities.

The city is, after all, more than a collection of buildings, power elites and land uses. It is more than rich suburbanites and expatriate corporations. As Henry Churchill wrote, "the city is the people, and they have real interests which must be served".

It is relatively unimportant whether these interests are served in a planning or policy sense by people who operate out of the Mayor's office, or out of some executive agency such as an Office of Management and Budget, or, propitiously, out of a ready-made outfit that already has the appropriate title of Planning. But if these interests are not served by City Planners -- if our profession fails to adapt to these needs -- if we continue with our traditional focus on land use, zoning and design, then city planning will indeed survive, but not as a significant force in solving America's urban problems.

We will survive like Yale's fabled Mory's Tavern. The tables remain, but few can sit with ease. The glasses are raised, but not on high. And voices joined will sing a tune that only few vaguely recall. We will pass and be forgotten like the rest.