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Revisiting Equity: The HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative

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Revisiting Equity

The HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative

By Lisa K. Bates and Marisa Zapata

IN 1974, NORMAN KRUMHOLZ boldly called on planners to advocate for equity in public resource allocation and administrative practices. In 2010, the Obama administration's HUD-DOT-EPA Sustainable Communities Initiative—specifically in the form of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant (SCRPG)—renewed this call for equity. But our review of the responses by thirteen grantees proved disappointing. The plans put forth by award winners recycle many of the activities from the Cleveland Policy Plan (CPP) without employing its overarching mission. Instead of boldness, we are left with a stark reminder about the lack of progress made since the City of Cleveland incited planners to aggressively attack societal inequity.

The Cleveland Policy Plan: Foundations for Equity Planning

The CPP set out a very clear agenda, one in which the application of equity goal would privilege planning activities that redistributed wealth.

Equity planning required that locally responsible government institutions give priority to the goal

of promoting a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who had few, if any, of them. The goal gave clarity and power to the staff's analyses. In evaluating proposals set before the Commission, and in developing the Commission's policy and program recommendations, the question of "Who pays?" and "Who benefits?" were key elements of the staff's analytic framework.

The CPP drew on a tradition of justice and fairness in western philosophy, religion and foundational documents of the United States. The justification for an equity-based plan was rooted in a moral code that said that dramatic inequity was not only undesirable, it was a threat to the community fabric.

The ideas in the CPP were prescient: identifying a regional scale for diagnosing and addressing inequality and tackling not only community development and workforce issues, but also transit connectivity and fair share housing. The plan used the term "opportunity," as in the opportunity for jobs or the opportunity for safe, affordable housing. And the CPP specifically addressed suburban jurisdictions' exclusionary practices, violations of fair housing law and refusal to support transit connections as causes of persistent poverty in the central city.



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HUD's Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Revisits Equity in Planning

The SCRPG funds planning activities intended to result in "economically competitive, healthy, environmentally sustainable and opportunity-rich communities." Managed by a HUD that was re-invigorated under the Obama administration, the SCRPG called on

regions to embed equity into traditional planning activities around land use, transportation and environmental/climate action. Regional planning bodies like MPOs were to develop and extend their regional planning frameworks to integrate affordable housing and community and economic development into their land use and transportation plans.

The SCRPG in many ways echoes the CPP in calling for “equitable land use planning” to address segregation, exclusion and access to jobs and educational opportunities. HUD provides a specific definition of social equity values—“fair and equal access to livelihood, education and resources; full participation in the political and cultural life of the community; and self-determination in meeting fundamental needs.” These are intended to be infused into proposed activities. HUD’s program places significant emphasis on participation by traditionally marginalized groups as part of the vision of a sustainable community.

The Cleveland model is very clear about who is to be served by an equity agenda: those with the fewest choices, i.e., the poor. As the nation’s main agency for fair housing activities, HUD also specifies that housing must address protected classes, discusses issues of “generational economic disadvantage” and specifies low-income and communities of color as key targets for activities. Given these similarities, we asked whether the SCRPG could give rise to a new generation of Cleveland Policy Plans in regions around the country.

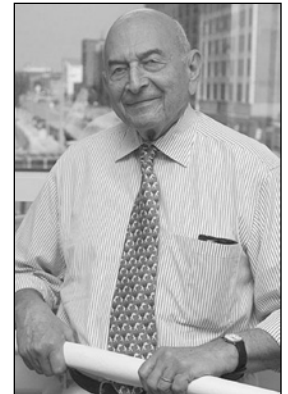
Justifications for Equity

While the SCRPG Notice of Funding Availability echoes the CPP in many areas, the actual grantees are far less specific about the populations of concern for an equity agenda. The plasticity of terms like vibrant, healthy and livable means they can be recognized by many groups, even though the groups may be talking about different visions when pressed to define specifics. Perhaps “equity” is not so amenable to broad agreement as a basic statement of a regional vision.

Equity for Whom?

In the proposals, choices are not only about those who currently have no or few choices, but also about

“maximum choosers” who might choose to live elsewhere altogether. The decision rules for planning become hazier as there is less focus on the appropriate groups of concern. A majority of the grantees did discuss the problems of limited income: five metro areas used the terms “poor” or “poverty,” while three additional areas discussed those with low income. But only five metro areas specified “minorities,” communities of color or racially segregated communities as having significant issues, and only three of these provided an acknowledgement of the history of racial segregation and how planning policies maintained it. Additionally, regions focused significant amounts of attention on problems and activities for those who already choose—for example, housing for a high-tech workforce, not for low-income families, or transit as an alternative to driving, rather than for those who cannot afford a personal vehicle.



Norman Krumholz

Equitable Action?

Perhaps most disappointing are the proposed actions. The language here is very similar to that of today’s equity advocates: choice, access and opportunity to make one’s own future, however, many of the activities were vague and required additional study. Many activities were only specified as far as collecting data, not as particular programs or regulations. The lack of specific activities is surprising for two reasons: 1) the regions studied are phase two sites and are further developed as regions with existing plans; and 2) where there are specific activities discussed they are activities that have been discussed for decades. For instance, increasing mobility and job access for people from marginalized backgrounds was something that the CPP advocated for and something Krumholz discussed as one of the major successes of the plan. Decades later these regions are still *talking* about implementing these ideas. They still need data. They are still looking for best practices.

The practice of suburban jurisdictions using exclusionary zoning and defying fair housing mandates was described in the CPP; numerous studies have de-

termed that there are significant regulatory barriers to affordable housing. Segregation by race and class was apparent and remains so. Forty years later, these regions still need to confirm these findings before acting on housing problems. For instance, the regions will *collect and analyze data*, including a range of indicators about the existing housing stock and related economic and demographic profiles of communities. Regions will also *assess* the regulatory framework in which they operate, including an evaluation of existing plans and policies and what impediments they create to achieve housing goals. From this information, *plans and strategies will be developed* to further housing goals. Overall, the housing activities are vague, however, it's possible that many of the regions are starting with extensive data collection and analysis and may be limited in their ability to know their next steps at this time. Sacramento was unique as it indicated that further study was not needed; it needed to work to help localities update plans and policies to further fair housing goals.

Equitable Process and the Planners' Role

In Cleveland, the commission and planners were to promote the equity goal to decision-makers and to the public at the time of decisions. Planners would design alternative proposals when the original proposals did not properly address the goal. Planning staff would also reallocate resources and change laws and administrative practices that did not serve the main goal, propose programs and lobby for them and work to ensure that responsible agencies were implementing programs according to the overarching equity goal.

In the HUD program, planners may not be active advocates of a singular decision rule for programs. Instead, planners convene broad participatory processes for planning sustainable communities. Planners bring in a broad range of stakeholders and pay attention to marginalized and traditionally underrepresented groups to develop a long-range vision of a regional future that recognizes mutual interdependence and builds support for "equitable land use planning." Paying attention to participation, however, is not the same as building support for moving resources and employing practices in pursuit of equity. In the grants there is limited discussion about how issues will be addressed if equity is not being pursued. Participation is seen as

"The [regional] analysis [of impediments to fair housing choice] should assess impediments to fair housing choice and link transportation, employment and housing resources in order to promote fair housing and affordable housing in high opportunity areas, and adhere to and promote fair housing law as described in the General Section, including ensuring maximum choice in housing without discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status and disability."

—Housing and Urban Redevelopment Notice of Funding Availability for HUD's Fiscal Year 2010 Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program

"The Commission recommends eliminating the requirement in the Federal Housing Act for a cooperation agreement between the local housing authority and the municipality in which public housing is to be provided. This requirement has enabled Cleveland's suburbs to exclude public housing from their communities and effectively blocked the dispersal of low-income housing in the Cleveland area."

—Cleveland Policy Plan, 1974

"As a result of the decentralization of development and the decline in transit service, an increasing number of activities, especially employment opportunities, are totally inaccessible to the transit-dependent population. . . . Obviously such restraints upon mobility lead to, or support, the narrowing of choices in employment, housing, recreation and health care."

—Cleveland Policy Plan, 1974

"Plans shall identify existing locations of public, assisted, low- and moderate-income housing and the relationship between that housing and current and future employment and transportation."

—Housing and Urban Redevelopment Notice of Funding Availability for HUD's Fiscal Year 2010 Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program

the primary way to ensure equitable interests are being considered, but outcomes cannot be predicted.

The grants devote considerable attention to their own governance structure but only talk about having broad-based support. The nitty-gritty of managing urban politics is not discussed. The CPP emphasized the importance of *political* allies and the willingness to take unpopular positions. This runs counter to the era of collaborative governance. Indeed, integration of multiple concerns across multiple activities may make it harder to argue forcefully for equity. No matter how explicitly collaborative and participatory activities are defined, there is no guarantee of equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

Equity planning is not the same as equity in planning. Today's arguments are more explicitly instrumental: equity brings prosperity, reduces costs for various social ills and is "a superior growth model." A key example of this argument is the Sacramento grant, which states as a rationale for addressing equity that it will "build a foundation for an economic rebound, through reduced housing and total living costs and diversified and increased employment opportunities."

What does it mean to use a "shared prosperity" argument for addressing inequality? Arguments today are crafted to reduce reactivity and promote the benefits for all of moving towards more equitable planning/policy. In the abstract, the ideas of regional coordination to achieve broad goals of health, prosperity, etc. are those that jurisdictions and agencies can sign onto. Goals around specific equity issues and particular marginal populations become hazier, but perhaps continue to have a place in the consensus.

But when the rubber meets the road—when resources must be allocated, projects prioritized and regulations revamped—a regional coordinated approach to equity does have to involve some advantaged groups giving things up. A very abstract conversation about "shared benefits and burdens" may be acceptable, but when it is time to actually redistribute, or lay out a mechanism for redistribution of attention, resources and people, will equity be at the forefront?

The grants present process as a way to address this. Regions will reach agreement through carefully orchestrated processes, and these processes will lead to more just outcomes. If planners are really to (re)take the equity planning challenge, can collaboration and consensus be the main frames of practice? Could the attention to continued engagement of equity advocates keep their feet to the fire for continuing to pursue equity when institutional and political inertia work against it?

The grants bring to the forefront another challenge that planners face today. What do planners do? Are planners meant to convene ideas? Are they leaders in thought or brokers of shared knowledge? They certainly have the technical knowledge to respond to the mechanisms of exclusion, yet the processes here do not place planners in the position that the CPP created. Planners are not given the power to act for equity, and neither are they seizing it.

Why this shift? Even at the time of Krumholz and compatriots, to make such an ideological plan from a city agency and to talk about justice and equality was radical—as the plan itself acknowledges. The plan makes explicit its ideology and the imperative to advocate, but it was borne of a time when people had been openly discussing justice, democracy and equality for its own sake. The CPP implicitly is about operationalizing civil rights. Today, however, talking about these concepts is incredibly difficult politically. HUD is an embattled federal agency constantly being attacked by the right for its (miniscule) re-distributive function in housing. Those convinced of "Agenda 21" or a government plot to force density, transit and public housing on an unwilling, freedom-loving American public are watching this program. On a local level, planning is no longer the locus of a justice movement. Planners are caught between a sustained critique from the left on grand-plan planning (from urban renewal to HOPE VI) and attacks from the right about individual property rights, including the right to "NIMBY." With a weak political position as well as continued erosion of planning departments by austerity regimes, planners are mostly defending the status quo and the existence of planning at all. In 1974, Krumholz laid out an audacious goal for planners and used his leadership, relationships and power in Cleveland to forward this goal. Today, such boldness is missing. P²