VIEWPOINT

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In the April 1994 edition of the Journal you published an interesting and well researched article by Merle Sowman entitled "Improving the Practice of Public Participation in Environmental Planning and Decision-making in South Africa".

While commending the whole tenure of the article and the clarity of analysis, I think that some comments on some practical problems of implementation may be pertinent.

As a practitioner who has recently been involved with planning schemes in which many of the issues highlighted in the article were exposed, I can illustrate where some of the strategies suggested were effective and where others could not be satisfactorily exploited.

THE BASIC PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The interactive communication process between the affected public and the professional team at all stages of the design demands strategies and skills which are difficult to find in any community let alone those to be found in South Africa in 1994. The mental picture of groups of people sitting around a table in intelligent discussion at all the proposed stages of conceptualization and reaching a "good" final planning solution acceptable to all may be a lovely dream but has, as well, the potential to become a nightmare of confusion and unresolved compromises.

The easy answer to avoid such chaos is, of course, to avoid public participation altogether and this has motivated officialdom in the past to do just that or perhaps just to pay lip service to the idea of participation by "calling for objections" at a stage in the process when it is then too late.

The objective should clearly be to ensure that the right kind of participation should occur at the right times. I have some doubt as to whether the phasing network charted by Merle Sowman can be relied upon to achieve this. The proper communication between the "public" and the professional team relies on all kinds of factors which have nothing to do with the network. It may have to do with language and cultural differences, pictorial and illustrative skills, personal attitudes, debating skills and scaling of "class" barriers.

The techniques need to be assessed for their appropriateness at each stage of the process.

The preliminary data collection and definition of goals require quite different ways of handling from those appropriate in the final assessment stage. While this may seem obvious, its lack of appreciation causes much frustration and deviation in practice. Some really good designers are poor communicators and some good communicators are very poor designers.

In order to place my comments in perspective and in the interest of simplicity I will reduce the planning process to three stages:

- Definition of the problem and data collection.

- Exploration of concepts and priorities.

- Resolution of the design proposals, testing and acceptance.

Parallel with all three of these stages is the very important issue of costs and cost/benefit equations.

1 DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM AND DATA COLLECTION

This stage is probably the most difficult both as a process and as a format. Does it end up as a collection of facts or does it formulate attitudes resulting from processes such as opinion surveys and identification of community attitudes?

In later stages it is possible for the design team to present to the community participants ideas in the form of statements of intent, outline sketch ideas and flow diagrams for comment and debate. But in the early stages there is nothing to present and the average community group has little skill in foreseeing the impact of nebulous concepts with no clear form or direction.

The problem starts with the brief which is usually formulated by a section of the public authority. It is always circumscribed by time and cost constraints. It is seldom, if ever, recognised that this stage is the most time-consuming of the three and appropriate costs are not allocated to it. The professional team is pressured to "get on with the job" and its fees do not, in any case allow for a high proportion to be allocated in this direction.

Contemporary planners should be proficient in establishing the geophysical, ecological and cadastral constraints of the terrain. If the data are not available from existing sources a great amount of field work needs to be done. Here again the costs involved in doing a really thorough job are seldom available.

So even before contemplation of any form of public participation, resources are likely to be very limited: who should become involved? and how?

Present and future users.

The Ordinary Public

For ordinary relatively disinterested

people living in the area, it is extremely difficult to set up a useful forum. There is nothing to "see" at this stage so there is "nothing to talk about". If the kind of question posed is "what would you like to see in your future neighbourhood?" the answers tend either to be unrealistically subjective or equally unrealistically fantastical.

If the questions present alternatives such as "would you rather have this or that?" the questionnaires have to be extremely carefully framed and monitored in order to avoid the kind of statistical nonsense that results from arbitrary data collected from non-representative samples. For the "man in the street" to become interested enough to react at all at this stage far more needs to be done in the way of promotion than the usual "official notices" advertisements published by Local Authorities.

Maybe when all is said and done this section of the survey may just as well be postponed until the next stage when real alternatives could be formulated and presented in a more graphic way.

The Commercially Interested

This group of the public can normally be relied upon to provide some fairly clear notions of what they would like to see in the final plan. In the kind of exercises I have been familiar with, these are people such as shopkeepers, transport firms, tour operators and property owner/developers.

As these people tend to be literate and articulate their ideas and attitudes can be sought by relatively simple questionnaires. The only problem for the investigator is to find out who they are and to make the contact in a way that evokes interest rather than disdain.

The Interested "NGOs"

These range from environmentalist societies to nature lovers and rate payers' associations.

My experience in liaising with such groups in the early data-collecting stages varies from the very useful to the "non event". At the risk of over-

generalizing the most positive communication tends to come from people or groups who are intimately familiar with the area concerned. People like members of climbing clubs, the local museum and historical societies.

Bodies such as ratepayers' societies tend literally to be mixed bunches, often lacking in any common attitudes and split into factions with parochial vested interests which are liable to obscure the kind of broad concepts required at this stage. The exception to this is where an individual or small group (say two or three people) chosen for their understanding of the issues involved are delegated to confer with the team.

I am sorry to say that environmentalists, not intimately familiar with the area, very often show little interest at this stage and if they do, they tend to pontificate on a theoretical basis rather than to produce useful ideas directed to the problem in hand. This is understandable where the skills of environmental analysis and assessment are not represented on the design team which should, of course, be the case. The problem is an historical one. Up until the 1940s most plans for "development" were plans of subdivision submitted to the surveyors general of the provinces. They were usually prepared by land surveyors on behalf of landowners. We have inherited many of our attitudes from these times and the various acts and ordinances passed in the last 50 years tend to bear the stamp of this background.

As a result environmentalists find themselves taking up stances which are essentially opposed to the kind of planning we had become used to. If by consulting the "ordinary public", the "commercially interested" and the environmentalists, one could have a debate to sort out priorities prior to the second stage. This would be literally fantastic, but I really cannot visualize such a thing happening. I have attended meetings which attempt to do this. On occasions they have been conducted by professional "facilitators" and I have found them quite ineffectual and frustrating.

Why this was so, had to do with the questionable representativeness of the people who attended the meetings, the

lack of preparation for addressing the notions put forward and the kind of simplistic game play put forward as an attempt to sort out priorities. I am convinced that a properly organized survey conducted by the professional team would have evoked a far better picture of attitudes and preferences - like any other opinion poll.

The question still arises as to whether that survey would not have been more meaningful if it was conducted after some initial broad concepts had been formulated say in stage 2.

2 EXPLORATION OF CONCEPTS AND PRIORITIES

This is probably the most important stage in the whole process. There are two precepts which have bugged the planning community and which endanger the effectiveness and productivity of their work.

The first is the notion that good concepts will automatically flow from thorough investigation, analysis and synthesis.

The idea on imaginative pre-image of a concept may derive from all manner of predilections on the part of the planners and their employers. These may be seen to be positive or negative by sections of the public but they are always going to be a factor. But no matter what the opinions are, one thing is certain and that is that awareness of all the constraints presented by all aspects of the environment is an absolute essential, the sensitivity of the planners to the impact of these constraints being axiomatic.

The second precept is one which says that "planning must work from the greater to the smaller". While this is a notion which has obvious merit it has, as well, within it some dangerous pitfalls. This may be illustrated by the planning of residential neighbourhoods. Here the end objective is clearly to provide a context for a "family unit" to be able to enjoy the greatest possible range of opportunities for the development of its domain within a prescribed erf. It should therefore, follow that the whole planning process should be directed towards satisfying this objective rather than imposing

some overriding pattern on the land which may inhibit this primary goal.

The issue is exacerbated by some of the norms which have been handed down by inherited doctrine (mainly from European sources) and by officialdom.

Norms such as minimum erf size, road widths and building lines have become so much of the unalterable vocabulary of planners that they tend to permeate the whole process and restrict a full range of inventiveness.

Having said that, what are the main issues that should be addressed by the planner in formulating the preliminary concepts that can be debated with others at this stage of the planning exercise? I suggest that the first should be the identification of constraints and the possible overlaps and inconsistencies that they present. The following comments and suggestions assume a context wherein the natural environment and its conservation plays an important role in the process.

Constraints and their Implications

Natural Constraints

If the surveys undertaken in stage one have been properly carried out, there should be little difficulty in depicting them in a format which can be presented to the public for useful debate and the confirmation of priorities. Where the terrain is basically undeveloped with strong natural physical characteristics a hierarchy of conservation worthiness is suggested as the basis for an IEM forum. For this purpose it has been found useful in practice to use three categories:

• Areas warranting full conservation measures, i.e. "hands off" for physical development.

• Areas warranting conservation measures at a secondary level. This might include for some development such as recreational or sporting facilities.

• Areas suitable for development (The nature of development to be held over for later stage debate).

Provided the appropriate ground work has been done it is a relatively simple matter to produce diagrams showing the proposals for the definition of these areas. We have found it useful to prepare slides for public presentation so that the preliminary assessments made by the planning team can be debated in a public forum. The nature of the appropriate forum is discussed later.

The criteria for deriving these categories are geology, soil associations, land forms, vegetation communities and environmentally visual sensitivity. In some regions availability of water will need to be included.

Historical Constraints

Cultural, ownership, statutory and archaeological.

In most of these categories the control mechanisms are vested in statutory enactments. In South Africa the rights of owners are well protected by the registration process and conditions of title and transfer which are in turn influenced by conditions imposed by Planning Ordinances. As pointed out by Merle Sowman, the Physical Planning Act of 1991 provides for very limited opportunities for public input. The National Monuments Act seeks to control the conservation of the historical built environment and the National Monuments Council has some powers to control the use and conservation of archaeological sites.

At first glance, it may appear that all these aspects are fully covered by statutory controls and that there is little room for flexibility by the input of planners or the public. But this is not really the case or at best this view is an over-simplification.

It is, of course, essential that the planning team undertakes a very full voyage of discovery into all the realms which impose legally enforceable restrictions on land use. The summation of them all can result in a very complicated network which may involve contradictions and inconsistencies which can only be resolved by reference to legal authority. A simple example of this is where title conditions conflict with restrictions imposed

by statutory town planning schemes.

On the one hand it would be foolhardy to proceed with the preparation of a planning scheme without resolution of these issues.

On the other hand this could result in years of delay and the expenditure of vast sums of money in legal costs before any conceptual planning could proceed. In the end, it comes down to a question of judgement, by the team and/or the commissioning authority as to whether or not they should proceed on their own evaluation of the situation.

It is difficult to imagine any useful public participation at this stage of the game and yet the public would have to be put fully in the picture before it could make any intelligent comment on any schematic proposals that may be affected by such parameters.

It follows, therefore, that any public presentations made during this stage should be preceded by some explanation of the situation. This may be very difficult to portray in a simple and suitable manner. The only suggestion that comes to mind is that a broad sheet showing where vested ownership rights are likely to affect the planning process could be distributed to all interested parties before any public debate is undertaken. It still, however, remains an area where the value of public participation is questionable.

Other constraints of an historical nature are easier to identify but require diligent research. They can be listed as follows:

• Cultural History & Archaeology
• Religious relics and burial sites.

Cultural History

It is insufficient for the design team to rely on the proclamations and requirements of the National Monuments Commission to identify places and buildings which are conservation worthy. In essence it proclaims some places as historical monuments and its Act enables it to prevent the demolition of buildings which it deems to have cultural value and are 50 or more years old. But by no means are all

such places listed or known to the council and their being brought to its notice depends on somewhat arbitrary circumstances.

To ensure that no archaeological sites are missed is also a difficult issue. To have a full survey of the area carried out by professionals can be a very costly and time absorbing exercise.

Here again the general public may have local knowledge which could be invaluable but it can only be brought to the fore by extensive publicity on the lines that a planning exercise is being undertaken and requests made for informed people to come forward with any useful information. General debate with "the public at large" would not fit the bill.

Religious relics and burial sites

Many important sites are not recorded in any plans or documents. On three occasions I have found early Muslim burial sites in the Cape Peninsula in planning areas. None of these have been shown on any cadastral records and some have been completely ignored on approved subdivisions. They have only been discovered by walking virtually every square metre of the area. Once discovered it is not an easy matter to find documents or people to relate their respective histories. Again the only recourse has been diligent detective work rather than "participation" in public fora.

Some sacred areas which are visited by African people to pay homage to the spirits of their ancestors are also seldom recorded and only identifiable by persistent investigation.

Resolution

Once all this has been digested it would be useful for the planners to reform and formalise a "Statement of Design Goals" which would include references to all the foregoing concerns which it considered relevant.

If the statement were to be accepted in principle by all interested parties it would form an invaluable firm base from which the final design process could be launched.

3 RESOLUTION OF THE DESIGN PROPOSALS, TESTING AND ACCEPTANCE

At this stage all designers and planners are faced with a complicated and often difficult series of parameters and directional forces. Their resolution into a design which satisfies them all requires all the skills and awareness which can be harnessed for the process. For all interested parties to participate in every stage of this resolution could make the task even more difficult and yet as pointed out by Merle Sowman (and others) it is expected that this should happen and in today's social climate it has become a "political" necessity.

After much soul-searching and attempting to match theoretically plausible concepts with pragmatic feasibility I put forward the format of the public presentation of concept in two stages - one at what could be called "Sketch Plan Stage" and the other "Final Concept" (including revisions).

The problem that all designers face is that of keeping the concept "fluid" and adaptable to all the possible influences at all stages of the design process. In fact if taken literally, it is a reiterative impossibility. The best that can be done is to introduce a reasonable degree of transparency by keeping people informed. That this could be done in the two stages cited does not mean that this will reflect the actual design process. It would mean that the public would be given an opportunity to comment before the scheme reaches finality. It could never mean that the design should become the concoction of a multiple authorship like the proverbial "camel being a horse designed by a committee".

Equally I do not believe in the process of presenting a number of alternative schemes for the participating public to assess and vote upon.

If the design has a properly motivated concept in mind its authors should have the confidence to present this. If comments thereon at the "Sketch Plan Stage" cause them to make alterations to be embodied in the final scheme well and good.

Merle Sowman refers to the process

adopted in Hout Bay by the Ratepayers Association and its Development Sub-Committee in glowing terms.

Whilst the process described is commendable it relies heavily upon the sense of responsibility and energy of the people involved. There are those who would say that since its inception things have changed to an extent that much of its accountability has been lost and several of the professionals on the original committee have resigned in protest. I have recently been given to understand that the Development Committee has now ceased to exist.

This comment is not intended to denigrate the process of assessment described but merely to show that systems and procedures are only as good as the people who participate in them and that to set down rigid and detailed rules of procedure are pointless unless they are directly related to the realities of the specific situation.

For a planning scheme of some size I recommend the following procedure for carrying out the resolution, testing and acceptance phase.

When the design has advanced far enough to be able to provide pictorial or diagrammatic illustrations of the concepts it has formulated, these should be put into a format such as colour transparencies suitable for presentation to a group of all interested parties invited to attend by means of full and effective advertisement.

Interested people should be invited to comment (in writing) after this showing. Although immediate verbal comment should not be excluded, putting them into writing has the great advantage of inducing thought and reconsideration as opposed to possible spur of the moment ill-formed reaction.

A similar feedback meeting should then be presented with the "final" draft scheme which would incorporate changes made as a result of the comments made. Where suggestions had been rejected by the team the reasons for this can be explained and rationalized. In nearly all cases where this procedure has been adopted I found that acceptance has followed.

Upon this "acceptance" the professional team is in a position to draw up the final scheme for submission to its client with a high degree of confidence and just as importantly there is a strong moral pressure on the client to approve knowing that the above procedures have indeed been followed.

As I have indicated, I believe there is no magic procedural formula for all situations but I hope that these comments may provide some reasonable and practical attitudes towards a plan of action.

SCHEDULE OF POSSIBLE WORK PLAN

Note: This schedule should be regarded as the maximum degree of public participation. Items in Bold Print are most important.

STAGE	THE PLANNING PROCESS	PUBLIC PARTICIPATION & THE PARTICIPANTS
1 Definition of the problem and Data Collection	1.1 Initial Definition by the commissioning authority.	
	1.2 Confirmation or expansion of Definition and defining goals.	Public input responding to publication of goals.
	1.3 Extensive surveys and data collection including opinion surveys.	**Response to enquiries by interest groups, NGOs and individuals.**
2 Exploration of concepts and priorities	2.1 Analysis of Data & translation into conceptual diagrams.	Presentation to and reaction from public.
	2.2 Formulation of draft schematic concepts including evaluation of alternatives where appropriate.	**Direct public fora.**
3 Resolution of Design Proposals testing and approval	3.1 Preparation of draft proposals and fullest possible presentation to public.	**Response to presentation by wide representation.**
	3.2 Refinement of draft proposals and preparation of completed draft.	Response to presentation and indication of approval/rejection by representative public (e.g. ratepayers).
	3.3 Final Plan and implementation.	Involvement of affected public . in management where appropriate.