

**THE ORGANISATIONAL LOCUS OF TOWN PLANNING WITHIN LOCAL  
AUTHORITIES: SOME PERCEPTIONS OF CHIEF TOWN PLANNERS OF LARGER  
LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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*In 'n houdingstudie onder hoof stadsbeplanners van 66 plaaslike owerhede in Suid-Afrika is gevind dat hoof stadsbeplanners in onafhanklike stadsbeplanningsdepartemente baie meer tevrede is met hul werksomstandighede as die in ingenieursdepartemente. Die gevoel is dat hulle hul werk beter kan uitvoer, hul ekspertise beter kan toepas, hulle meer dikwels om hul mening gevra word en meer deelneem aan top bestuursbesluite.*

*Die grootste enkele probleem waarmee hoof stadsbeplanners worstel is 'n gebrek aan professionele erkenning en inmenging in hul werk deur mede amptenare en raadslede.*

*Alhoewel reeds ongeveer 33% van alle hoof stadsbeplanners in Suid-Afrika aan die hoof staan van 'n onafhanklike stadsbeplannings departement, is die meeste hoof stadsbeplanners deel van 'n ingenieursdepartement. Verreweg die meeste van laasgenoemde groep het aangedui dat die enigste oplossing 'n onafhanklike departement op posvlak 1 is.*

*Stadsbeplanners het ver gevorder van die tradisionele rol van toepassing van die dorpsbeplanningskema en die uitlê van dorpe. Hulle is tans betrokke by beplanningsaksies wat die totale sosiale en fisiese omgewing raak: met*

*in agneming van die statutêre, fisiese, demografiese, ekonomiese, sosiologiese parameters en hoe hierdie deur plaaslike, streeks-, en nasionale ontwikkelingsbeleid beïnvloed word.*

*Die plasing van die stadsbeplanner moet gesien word in die konteks van hierdie nuwe rol en moet saamhang met die aard, omvang en inhoud van die stadsbeplanningsfunksie van daardie bepaalde owerheid. Die hoof stadsbeplanner moet genoeg gesag hê om hom in staat te stel om sy werk na behore uit te voer.*

*An attitudinal survey conducted amongst Chief Town Planners of 66 local authorities in South Africa revealed that Chief Town Planners in autonomous planning departments are generally more satisfied with their working conditions than their counterparts in engineering departments. They feel that they can execute their work more effectively, use their expertise to better advantage, that their opinions are more respected and that they can contribute more towards top management decisions.*

*Chief Town planners are of the opinion that their biggest problems are a lack of recognition for their profession and interference with their work by fellow officials and Councillors.*

*Although approximately 33% of all Chief Town Planners in South Africa are currently heading an autonomous planning department, most of the Chief Town Planners are situated within an engineering department. Most of the Chief Town Planners in engineering departments indicated that organizationally they should be located in an autonomous planning department on post level 1.*

*Town planners have come a long way from their traditional role of controlling land uses through the town planning scheme and planning township layouts.*

*They are currently concerned with planning actions that involve the wider social and physical environment: including the statutory, physical, demographical, economical and sociological parameters and influence of these on local, regional and national development policies.*

*The place of town planners in the organizational structure should be seen within the context of their new role and should be in direct relation to the nature, extent and content of the planning functions of that particular local authority. It is also important that the Chief Town Planner should have enough authority to execute his work.*

## **1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was

- (i) to determine the perceptions of chief town planners of larger local authorities in South Africa within their various organisational structures regarding aspects of their professional and their work situation
- (ii) whether such perceptions differ between situations and
- (iii) whether the organisational locus of town planners has any bearing on work satisfaction.

## **2. THE PROBLEM**

When town planning schemes were introduced into South African municipalities in the 1940's, the human resources required to implement the schemes were found, because of a lack of town planning skills in South Africa at that time, in existing civil engineering departments.

In consequence town planning branches developed within the civil engineering department and were staffed and organised primarily to administer and amend the town planning scheme and

to respond to applications. This largely reactive, engineering orientation was seen as being adequate for almost four decades. However, over the past few years there has been an increased awareness, by public and elected representatives, of a wide range of planning issues and of the need for policy and project planning, urban conservation, environmental planning and public participation as part of the planning process.

In consequence expectations of town planning branches and demands on

their staff to take a pro-active role have increased.

During this period, the introduction of town planning Courses at universities raised the level of expertise and skills of town planners.

Because of the increased complexity of planning issues and the commensurate degree of planning training required, town planners within local authorities are increasingly facing a variety of problems with respect to fulfilling their town planning functions when located within the civil engineering department. These include *inter alia*:

- (i) Because the town planner does not have the necessary qualifications to head a civil engineering department, his promotion and career prospects within a municipality are limited.
- (ii) Frustration when his recommendations are interpreted on the basis of another perspective by the city engineer who may consequently present them in a biased way to the decision makers.
- (iii) As the planner must accept responsibility for decisions affecting his work, its status could be affected which could in turn affect motivation and the zest for work.
- (iv) Such untenable personnel practices could lead to problems relating to the provision of staff and their utilisation.
- (v) The town planning profession, (which is recognised in terms of the Town and Regional Planning Act 1984) could be affected if the independent judgement of town planners is ignored in an irresponsible way.
- (vi) Town planning is incorrectly considered to be a line function whilst it is in fact a staff function: relating to all other departments within the municipality. In fact, town planning provides the broad framework within which all the other departments should function, *including* the civil engineering department.
- (vii) In large civil engineering departments, where the range of control is so wide, empire building could in fact undermine the position of the planner.
- (viii) An unwarranted organisational suffocation of the town planning

function could not only detrimentally affect town planners but the general welfare of the community: because it could lead to the lack of comprehensive planning and eventually affect the activities of other individual departments.

Some municipalities have addressed these problems by creating an autonomous town planning department. However most planning departments are still situated within a civil engineering department (Adlem, 1988).

### 3. STUDY METHOD

During 1988 questionnaires were sent to 66 local authorities in South Africa, representing every municipality where a town planner was employed at the time. A response of 70%(46) was gained.

Based on the responses to the questionnaire the following can be noted:

#### 3.1 General Information regarding the Chief Town Planner of a Municipality The average chief town planner of a municipality:

- (i) is 39 years old,
- (ii) is male (96% of respondents),
- (iii) is Afrikaans speaking (78% of respondents),
- (iv) has 8 years service with his present employer,
- (v) has a university degree in town planning (26% of the respondents had a masters degree),
- (vi) has a post designation of Chief Town Planner (61% of respondents) but may also be called Town Planner, Senior Town Planner, Planning Officer, Deputy City Engineer (Planning), Assistant City Engineer (Planning).

Town Planners in autonomous planning departments may also be styled as Director of Town Planning or Director of Development Planning.

#### 3.2 Position within the Organisational Structure

A third of the respondents (15) are situated in a town planning department reporting directly to the town clerk and council. Of these, approximately 24% are employed in Grade 11 to 15<sup>1</sup> municipalities whilst 76% are in Grade 7 to 10 municipalities. Twenty

<sup>1</sup> Grades approved by the Board in terms of the provisions of the Act on the remuneration of Town Clerks, 1985.

(63%) of the respondents are located in a civil engineering department. In two instances the planning department falls under the Department of the Town Secretary or the Town Clerk.

In one instance an autonomous town planning department was headed by a professional engineer.

Of the 31 cases (67%) where town planners were not situated in autonomous planning departments, approximately 13 (42%) had no direct supervision by a non-planner regarding the execution of their work, whilst 18 (58%) were supervised by a non-planner; generally a professional civil engineer.

#### 3.3 Perceptions of Chief Town Planners in Autonomous Town Planning Departments versus the Perceptions of those situated in an Engineering Department

The perceptions of chief town planners in autonomous planning departments differed markedly from those situated in a civil engineering department.

##### 3.3.1 Co-operation between Officials

There seems to be better co-operation between the chief town planner and fellow officials where the chief town planner is situated in an autonomous planning department: (93% of the respondents in autonomous departments noted that they enjoyed excellent co-operation against 80% of those in engineering departments).

##### 3.3.2 Respect from other Officials towards the Chief Town Planner

There seems to be much greater respect from fellow officials towards a chief town planner situated in an autonomous planning department than towards those in an engineering department: (100% of respondents in an autonomous planning department were of this opinion as against the 57% of respondents in engineering departments).

##### 3.3.3 Contribution to Planning Decisions and their Implementation

Within the organisation as a whole, chief town planners in autonomous planning departments seem to contribute more to planning decisions taken at top management level: (100% of respondents in autonomous, planning departments felt that they were

able to make a significant contribution against 70% of those in engineering departments).

Chief town planners in autonomous planning departments also seem to have more control over the implementation of planning decisions: (94% of respondents in autonomous planning departments against 80% of those in engineering departments indicated that they are in a position to monitor the implementation of planning decisions).

### 3.3.4 Work Input Policy

Chief town planners in autonomous planning departments seem to be in a better position than those in an engineering department to make recommendations regarding the planning of an overall work policy and for the improvement of the flow of work and methods: (100% of respondents in autonomous planning departments agreed that they are in such a position against 66% of those in engineering departments. In fact, 22% of respondents in engineering departments disagreed that they were in such a position).

### 3.3.5 Emotional Involvement and Personal Satisfaction

Chief town planners in autonomous planning departments (100%) seem to be more emotionally involved in their work than their counterparts in engineering departments (90%). Likewise chief town planners in autonomous planning departments seem to get more personal satisfaction from their work than their counterparts in engineering departments: (87% versus 76%). A significant 23% of respondents in engineering departments were undecided about this question.

### 3.3.6 Working Conditions

Taking everything into account chief town planners in autonomous planning departments are more satisfied with their working conditions than those in engineering departments: (87% of respondents in autonomous planning departments against only 50% in engineering departments.)

Specific areas to which this relates are:

- (a) The working conditions are regarded as being conducive to the proper execution of their work (90% against 53%).

- (b) It allows the chief town planner to apply his expertise and fulfil his role properly (93% against 74%).
- (c) There is more freedom to execute their work effectively (94% against 63%).
- (d) They know exactly what is expected of them (94% against 74%).
- (e) They are always consulted before changes are made that affect their working conditions (86% against 66%).
- (f) Top level management makes more effort to obtain their opinion with regard to matters pertaining to their work (80% against 53%).

### 3.4 Perception of Chief Town Planners in Engineering Departments who are not subject to direct supervision versus those who are.

The differences between the perceptions of chief town planners in engineering departments who are not subject to direct supervision differ from those who are. The pattern which emerges is similar to that of planners in autonomous planning departments against those in engineering departments.

- (a) There is better co-operation with fellow officials (100% of respondents with no direct supervision against 67% with supervision).
- (b) They enjoy greater respect from fellow officials (100% against 61%).
- (c) They feel that they can contribute more towards planning decisions and their implementation (100% against 50%).
- (d) They have a greater input into work policy (83% against 58%).
- (e) They get far greater personal satisfaction from their work (92% against 67%).
- (f) Taking everything into account they are more satisfied with their working conditions (83% against 28%).

### 3.5 Summary

From the questionnaire it is evident that the more autonomous town planners are in the municipal organisational structure the more satisfied they are with their general working conditions. They enjoy better co-operation from fellow officials; can contribute more to planning decisions and their implementation; are in a better position to provide input into a work policy; and gain more personal satisfaction from their work.

## 4. PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY CHIEF TOWN PLANNERS AND SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Some of the problems and suggested improvements were:

- (a) Approximately 33% of respondents in autonomous planning departments, 50% of those in engineering departments with no supervision and 72% of respondents in engineering departments with direct supervision mentioned a lack of recognition and interference by fellow officials and councillors in the planning process as a major problem.

It was indicated that these problems could be solved by involving the town planning department in all aspects regarding planning as well as the education of top management with respect to the role and functions of the town planner.

- (b) Approximately 33% of respondents in autonomous planning departments, 17% of those in engineering departments with no supervision and 11% of respondents in engineering departments with direct supervision mentioned the problem of officials and councillors not appreciating town planning input. This often results in both irrational and internal political decisions being made which influence the allocation of resources for the town planning department.

Education and the introduction of a city/town management system i.e. career manager were mentioned as possible solutions.

- (c) Whilst 61% of the respondents in engineering departments subject to direct supervision by a non-planner and 50% of respondents with no direct supervision, indicated that an autonomous planning department on Grade 1 may provide a solution to the problem, 50% of respondents in autonomous planning departments specifically indicated that they did not experience any real problems.

## 5. TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Increasing urbanisation and the demands for enhancing the quality of life in our cities have demanded more skills from town planners than the traditional administration of the zon-

ing scheme and the production of township layouts. Town planners need to address the total social and physical environment: taking cognizance of the statutory, physical, demographic, economic, sociological, parameters and how these influence and are influenced by local, regional and national development policies.

It is breadth and complexity of planning issues which has given rise to today's well qualified and skilled town planners and their registration in terms of the Town and Regional Planners Act of 1984, which provides them with professional status in the same manner as the older professions, i.e. engineers, and architects.

From the study it appears that these skilled planners are being frustrated in a municipal environment where fellow officials and councillors still see them in a traditional role of administering the zoning scheme and producing township layouts.

If our towns and cities are to make an impact on the improvement of the quality of life of their inhabitants then town planners should be allowed to

fulfil their functions and be given the necessary authority to act.

The organisational locus of the town planner within a municipality will depend on the nature, extent and content of the planning needs and functions required by each individual local authority. The functions must determine the nature of the organisational structure and not vice versa: this alone should be the consideration, and not existing empires, internal politics or personalities.

Irrespective of whether the town planning unit is situated in an autonomous department or within an engineering or other department, the chief town planner must be given enough authority to execute the functions he is required to fulfil, i.e.

- (a) Because town planners provide services to all departments of the municipality, the chief town planner must have direct contact at departmental head level.
- (b) The chief town planner must be able to communicate directly with government departments, community groups and the public.

Where it is necessary to place the chief town planner in another department enough authority must be delegated to him to ensure that he will in fact be able to make a contribution. At the same time it is also recognised that the delegation of too much authority could lead to conflict within that department.

In order to prevent such a dilemma, the town planning function should wherever practical, be autonomous so that he may work with other departments as a member of a balanced team. South African experience indicates that autonomous planning departments operate efficiently even at Grade 7 level.

A rational decision on the locus of town planning according to the functions required of that specific town planning department together with enough authority for the chief town planner to execute those functions will lead to better job satisfaction and a more harmonious and productive work environment.

ADLEM, J. 1988. Memorandum oor die organisatoriese locus van stadsbeplanning binne plaaslike owerheidswese. Ongepubliseer, Unisa, 1988.