

SOME SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE URBAN PLANNING SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The foundation of the existing town planning system was conceived in the 1930's, and based essentially on American and English experience at the time.

It has remained generally intact through the years except for certain additions as against fundamental changes to it. The introduction of guide plans in terms of the Physical Planning Act and the provisions of the Urban Transport Act are cases in point. At the same time continued attempts have been made to refine the system within its framework.

Accepting it for what it is, the system has worked generally well.

However, if it is to remain effective, it must be continually doctored and adapted to the circumstances of the time.

Unless the doctoring process takes place, and does so successfully, the system will gradually fall into disrepute to a point where major changes of structural nature will be needed.

Through increasing demands made by urbanization and development, coupled with a need for greater operational efficiency, the stage has now been reached where problems that are becoming evident at management, procedural and technical levels, must be dealt with boldly and comprehensively.

Years of exposure to the planning process naturally leads to the formulation of ideas and opinions as to what is needed to rectify and improve the system.

The suggestions and discourse that follow, purposely kept in broad and general terms, are offered in a spirit of constructive criticism: to act as a basis for stimulating thought, encouraging discussion, and ultimately once refined, hopefully some action.

The comments are based essentially on the writer's experience in the Transvaal, but no doubt have a bearing in many cases to other provinces as well.

SUGGESTIONS

1. *Town planning ought to be a separate department, equal in status to other departments in local authorities.*

There are still too many exceptions to this basic requirement.

Local councillors should be taught to understand that it is not in the public interest for town planning work to be controlled by engineers.

The power of directing policy, vetoing reports and taking planning decisions in general is beyond their field of competence.

In addition, the combination of both functions in large local authorities invariably results in loss of efficiency and expensive delays in decision making.

2. *Heads of town planning departments of large local authorities ought to be appointed for a period of 4 or 5 years, with an option for a second term only at the discretion of the Council.*

This allows for more than ample time for a man to make his contribution.

Beside the indirect effect of making him more accountable for his actions, it also keeps the department on its toes and prevents lethargy from setting in.

It is practice in several developed countries for top management to be appointed for a limited time, as well as rotation between the private sector, public sector and academia.

For example, in many American cities the top town planning post along with other top municipal posts form part of the 4 to 5 year local elections.

3. *Town planning departments ought to be reorganised and in certain cases trimmed, to form elite administrative cores.*

The situation is generally one where the development control section is overworked while demand on the planning and design sections is intermittent. In addition criticism is often passed that a considerable amount of information collected by the data section is never really used in the execution of town planning work.

The situation is often aggravated by departments being overstaffed at the top (too many chiefs) and understaffed at the bottom, i.e. not enough workers actually producing the goods. At the same time, the acceptance of work coming up the line is subjected to unnecessary delays through personality stamps. This is bad for morale, and dissatisfaction sets in.

A redistribution and optimization of resources is required.

The plan making function ought to be allocated largely to consulting firms as demand and staff composition varies dramatically for this function from time to time.

The same application ought to be adopted for data requirements and informative investigations.

As city councils would have to vote money for particular assignments, reckless demand for all sorts of unnecessary plans and investigations would be avoided.

Several European countries have successfully adopted this system.

4. *Economics, especially the economics of urban development should become central to town planning.*

One of the greatest failures of town planning today lies in the blatant disregard of economic factors by town planners in general.

This has fundamental implications, both direct and indirect, for the well being of cities and their inhabitants.

For far too long now economics has played second fiddle to other so-called noble causes.

If planning is to succeed and gain credibility, then it must be seen to be realistic.

Problems could be largely avoided from the start by strengthening the economic content of planning courses at university.

Unless there is a change of attitude amongst planners so as to lead to a more balanced approach, more harm than good will be done to the very society they are trying to help.

5. *Law must always be seen as the servant, and not the master of good town planning.*

This is a matter of increasing concern as planning legislation continues to be intensified and extended (sic).

Many planners have formed the habit of running for legal advice when in the slightest doubt over the planning intent of some clause or regulation.

The outcome is understandably predictable. Lawyers will express the most restrictive opinion as it is the safest course to do so.

This practice is regrettable, as planners are clearly better equipped than anybody else to identify intent in the best interest of good town planning.

6. *All government and provincial programmes and policies that have a bearing on town planning ought to be referred to the local authorities concerned and stored in a central data bank.*

This would create a one stop information centre of enormous benefit to both consultants and public alike.

Beside the obvious saving of time, effort and frustration that one is confronted with at present, such a system would introduce a new level of safety by ensuring the availability of *all* existing information for any particular assignment.

This is of major importance, as omissions through no direct fault of anyone concerned, are becoming increasingly

common. The prospects of being sued for damages is a reality.

7. *Administrators and politicians involved with planning must be taught how to use development plans, but the development plan system itself needs to be rationalised.*

The problem here lies in the dogmatic interpretation of plans as against using them as broad guides to development.

This problem may be related to the second aspect, namely the various ways such plans have been presented to date.

Although, as planning instruments, development plans were only recently introduced, there remains an urgent need to clarify the whole subject, so as to have a uniform system for the profession which deals with the hierarchy, form and content of such plans.

A fair amount of hardship has been caused through misunderstanding and incorrect application and this situation must be rectified as a matter of urgency.

8. *If town planning schemes are to be effective instruments of development control, they must be simplified and not complicated.*

Over the years more and more rules and regulations relating to type and intensity of land use have been introduced. Amendments to schemes and consents are being accompanied by an increasingly long string of conditions and provisos, ranging for example from details of points of vehicular entry to the preservation of a particular tree.

An enormous amount of time and effort is being taken up with trivia and detail that have little to do with the core of planning.

To be effective, town planning schemes should be engineered in the opposite direction, namely to act as a frame and to be concerned with the basics of the subject.

Aspects of building design and aesthetics, landscaping, traffic engineering, etcetera are best left to professionals in the fields concerned. Such professional responsibility ought to be ensured by being written into town planning schemes.

9. *The Town Planning and Townships Ordinance ought to be amended so that rezoning and township applications become a local authority affair.*

Local authorities are best equipped to handle such matters. Provincial and Government departments ought to concentrate on broad regional and metropolitan strategies as that is the job they are best able to do.

Naturally, it goes without saying that the approval of applications by local authorities must be within the planning context of those strategies.

Such an approach would open the door to enable applications to be finalized in at least half the time that it takes now.

It would have particular implications for township development, as the present 3 to 5 years can be a nightmare for those financially involved.

10. *The Administrator should give reasons for planning decisions.*

Firstly because it is not only necessary to do justice but show that justice has been done.

Secondly because a reasoned judgement would act as a guide for other prospective applicants as to whether to proceed or not.

And thirdly, because it would enable dissatisfied parties to appeal to a higher court with an even chance of success. In the absence of reasons, a case on appeal is lost before it is heard.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is hoped that these suggestions will act as building blocks for both discussion and action.

As they are essentially hypotheses born out of experience, some could also be developed in dissertation form at university level.

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