

# Planning Theory for Practitioners

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## CHAPTER

## 4

## Rationales for Public Planning

### THE SEARCH FOR PLANNING'S BEDROCK

It is all very well, of course, to suggest that planners perform their professional role because it is important to the community and because no other professional group is doing these things. But what is the rationale, the justification, for asserting the importance of that role in the first place? Physicians practice because illness is a reality of the human condition, and we consider it important that people be aided in their quest for good health. Attorneys practice because we operate under a body of law that is critical to virtually all aspects of our lives, is highly complex, and is widely variable in interpretation; we consider it important to have access to expertise, far beyond that which most of us could provide for ourselves, to assist us in hacking our way through the legal jungle. In the same spirit, it is reasonable to ask why planners plan.

The literature on this topic is too vast and diverse to be summarized here; suffice it to say that numerous authors (myself included) have published their conceptions of the essence of planning—what it is all about. If all the pages from the papers and books written on this topic were placed end to end, they would stretch...well, at least around the block.

A good overview of the topic is provided in "Arguments for and against Planning," a classic article written in 1985 by Richard Klosterman.<sup>1</sup> The article illustrates the difficulty of attempting to identify rationales for planning on which we can all agree. As part of his "for" presentation, for example, Klosterman suggests four

"vital social functions" that are performed by public planning. Liberally paraphrased, they are as follows:

(1) *Planning provides the data needed for effective public and private decision-making.* Planners' studies, analyses, projections, social and economic indicators, maps, and other forms of information, according to this argument, are particularly important elements in facilitating smooth market operations at the local level.<sup>2</sup> How one feels about this function depends in part, of course, on one's perspective on market operations in a capitalist society.<sup>3</sup>

Also worthy of note is the impact of the computer-based information explosion that has occurred since Klosterman wrote his article. Data are now so widely available, from so many sources, that planning organizations no longer enjoy any exclusivity whatsoever in their roles as central data repositories. Many years ago, the planning director of a large city told me that the data that his department controlled was its major—indeed, perhaps its only—resource for the exercise of clout in the local political system; people had to come to the planning department for critical information regarding land matters, and this interaction provided the department with opportunities to influence key development decisions. One hopes the department has been able to identify other mechanisms for influence since that time.

(2) *Planning promotes the common or collective interests of the community, particularly with respect to the provision of public goods.* Klosterman offers transportation, environmental, and economic development planning as examples of planning that is done under this rationale.<sup>4</sup> The rationale relies on two concepts that have proven difficult to pin down, however. First, the phrase "common or collective interests of the community"<sup>5</sup> evokes the concept of the public interest, which will be examined later in this chapter. For now it will suffice to ask whether we have sound, and widely agreed upon, mechanisms for defining those "common or collective interests." The answer, as we shall see later, is not very encouraging.

The second troublesome concept is that of public goods, which are generally defined in terms of two characteristics. First, "it is either difficult or costly to exclude people from access to public goods. Unlike private goods, the property rights for public goods are not specified clearly."<sup>6</sup> Terry Moore (whose definitions are used here, and who has argued for the provision of public goods as the fundamental rationale for public planning) offers the following examples:

All persons using highways benefit from the provision of traffic signals whether they are residents of the jurisdiction providing them or not. The zoning practices of one jurisdiction may enhance the property values in other jurisdictions. In these and similar cases, it usually is argued that the costs of excluding people from these goods exceed the benefits to be gained from their exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, herein lies one of the problems associated with public goods: "If people cannot be excluded from the benefits of public goods, they will have little incentive to contribute for their provision. Hence, it is likely that in a market economy people will underallocate resources to the production of public goods."<sup>8</sup> The budgetary problems of most public schools stand as a telling example.

The second characteristic of public goods is their "nonrivalrous" nature; that is, "the consumption of a public good by one person does not preclude anyone else from consuming it."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, public goods "can be enjoyed simultaneously by more than one person"<sup>10</sup>—or, more to the point for our purposes here, by all those residing in the jurisdiction providing the good.

As Moore notes in his article, public goods are not definable in absolute terms; rather, they occupy one end of a continuum, with private goods (those allocated by market mechanisms) at the other end.<sup>11</sup> Determining precisely where a particular good belongs on that continuum has become increasingly difficult; the privatization of many functions once considered almost entirely public has certainly served to confuse the issue. Defense, public education, the postal service, highways, and even clean water and air are examples of functions that have been privatized to some extent, and thus subjected to market forces. Indeed, to restrict planning solely to matters involving the production and distribution of public goods would rule out much of what today's planners do.

(3) *Planning attempts to remedy the negative effects of market actions.* The market tends to produce unintended externalities, or spillover effects, that create problems for a community; industrial pollution, clogged traffic arteries, and suburban sprawl are examples. Some argue, in fact, that much of the planning enterprise in America consists of cleaning up after the problems that accompany market behavior—a sort of "pooper-scooper" theory of planning. By itself, however, this view does not present a particularly compelling

rationale for public planning. If remedying the negative effects of market actions were the sole function of planning, we would want to do a much better job of shifting the costs to those whose external effects require public action. Moreover, planning based on this rationale is largely reactive; it focuses on smoothing out existing problems rather than on helping to define and achieve a more desirable future.

(4) *Planning considers the distributional effects of public and private action, and attempts to resolve inequities in the distribution of basic goods and services.* This is a theme to which we shall return at several points in this book. For now, it will suffice to note that this is a value-based assertion regarding what planning *should* do, rather than an empirical description of what it does. Certainly Norman Krumholz's equity planning in Cleveland was consistent with this description (see Chapter 9). On the other hand, the "dark side" theorists encountered in the previous chapter would argue that resolving distributional inequities is precisely what planning does *not* generally do. Overall, I suspect that many planners attempt to abide by the spirit of Klosterman's fourth rationale in their work, but often find it all too easy to let their good intentions slip in the face of other, more pressing imperatives.

Clearly, all four of Klosterman's "vital social functions" of planning are open to debate. Some present conceptual complications, while others seem inconsistent with the dynamics of contemporary planning practice. As answers to the question "Why do planners plan?" they are only partially satisfying—for some kinds of planning, some of the time, under certain circumstances.

Another answer offered far more frequently, however, is implicit in Klosterman's second point about "the common or collective interests of the community." That answer asserts that planners plan in service to the public interest—that the public interest is, in fact, the very bedrock of planning. Let us turn, then, to an examination of that concept.

### THE PUBLIC INTEREST: REAL OR ILLUSORY?

In in-depth interviews with ninety-six public agency planners, Elizabeth Howe found that most of them claimed to use the concept of the public interest in their work. There was no uniformity, however, in how they defined it. "All their definitions had at their

core the obligation to serve the public, but, not surprisingly, how knowledge of the 'interest' or the 'good' of the public might be arrived at was open to different interpretations."<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Howe notes that when her interviewees "introduced the idea of the public interest or raised ethical issues in which it figured, they were primarily talking about their own ideas about the public interest."<sup>13</sup>

Few planning terms are simultaneously so widely invoked and so ill-defined. On the one hand, it is eminently reasonable to say that public planners should plan in (or for) the public interest; we would hardly want them to do otherwise. The problem, however, is in attempting to render the concept operational—that is, to give it a definition that is concrete, unambiguous, widely accepted, and applicable to real-world situations. Ideally, a planner confronted with a difficult professional decision should be able to consult the public interest concept for guidance, using it as a template to differentiate the more public-serving outcomes from those that are less so. Alas, such a template does not exist.

Scholars have long struggled with the notion of the public interest, and the work of welfare economists has been particularly instructive. A central tenet of their approach to the public interest (sometimes called the general welfare or the common good) has been the judgment that "it is ethically wrong to evaluate social states on a basis other than that of the welfare of individuals, and this primary value should be the base for any policy maker's set of objectives."<sup>14</sup> Ideally, then, the public interest of a particular society should somehow comprise the individual interests of all those who make up that society. The question is, how do we move from the individual level to the societal? That is, how do we take the preferences of all individuals in the society and transform them into a single societal preference? Of the considerable scholarship that has been devoted to this question, only a few highlights will be mentioned here.

Writing early in the twentieth century, Vilfredo Pareto proposed a criterion for determining whether a given policy proposal is consistent with the principle that social decisions should reflect the welfare of all individuals who make up the society. As paraphrased by William Baumol, Pareto's criterion stated that "any change which harms no one and which makes some people better off (in their own estimation) must be considered to be an improvement."<sup>15</sup> If I introduce a policy that will result in considerable profits for

some individuals while imposing absolutely no perceived costs on anyone else, then this policy is "in the public interest" by Pareto's standard. This formulation sounds perfectly reasonable, but it is of little use in assessing any proposal that, as is usually the case, will benefit some while imposing expenses on others. Virtually any planning issue of any significance involves the potential for unequal distribution of costs and benefits; some people win while others lose. Moreover, a loss is no less real if it is merely by comparison rather than actual; if the neighborhood next to mine receives a large infusion of public funds, I may be resentful even if my taxes are not being raised to make it happen and even if my neighborhood has no immediate need for additional funds. Overall, it is safe to conclude that the opportunities for planners to define the public interest by applying the Pareto principle are so rare (and would generally involve problems so trivial) as to be of no significance.

Nicholas Kaldor suggested a refinement of Pareto's criterion. Again as paraphrased by Baumol, Kaldor held that "a change is an improvement if those who gain evaluate their gains at a higher figure than the value which the losers set upon their losses."<sup>16</sup> Potentially, then, the losers could be compensated for their losses and there would still be a net gain for the society. (I gained \$100 from this policy while it cost you \$40; in theory, I can compensate you for your loss and the net gain for our two-person society will still be \$60. Sounds good to me!) An interesting wrinkle in Kaldor's criterion, however, is that in order for it to apply, compensation of the losers must remain potential *only*; if compensation actually occurs, then we are back to the situation covered by the Pareto criterion. In short, Kaldor's definition sounds fine in theory, but in practice it encounters the usual glitches.

Yet a third criterion was proposed by Abram Bergson, who asserted that the only way out of the problem is to formulate a set of explicit value judgments regarding the appropriate procedure to employ in passing from individual preferences to social policies. These judgments would reflect one or another view as to what constitutes justice, efficiency, or some other virtue in the distribution of the society's resources.<sup>17</sup> The problems here are obvious: who is to make these value judgments, and how? All we have to do, Bergson seemed to say, is achieve societal consensus on the way in which our resources will be distributed. Unfortunately, Bergson's

criterion did not come equipped with a set of instructions for achieving that consensus, so the difficult part of the task remains unaddressed.

A more general problem was raised by Kenneth Arrow, who argued convincingly that the attempt to pass from individual to social preferences is impossible in most situations.<sup>18</sup> Figure 4-1 illustrates this point.

		Preferences		
		First choice	Second choice	Third choice
Individuals	1	A	B	C
	2	B	C	A
	3	C	A	B

**Figure 4-1. Arrow's impossibility theorem illustrated.**

In the figure's hypothetical decision-making situation, a majority of the individuals (1 and 3) prefer alternative A to alternative B. A majority (1 and 2) also prefer alternative B to alternative C. If the ranking of these alternatives were linear (or "transitive," to use Arrow's terminology), we would expect that a majority would therefore prefer A to C as well. This is not the case, however; a majority (2 and 3) prefer C to A. In this situation, then, no collective decision can be made that is based on the personal preferences of the individuals involved.<sup>19</sup>

It is possible, of course, to argue with Arrow's point (and numerous scholars have done so, their chief weapons being the equations of symbolic logic). For example, his theorem does not take into account the differing intensities with which individual preferences are held, a matter that is frequently of some import in public planning issues. Overall, however, Arrow's theorem does a fine job of illustrating a reality with which any practicing planner is all too familiar: namely, that it is virtually impossible to generate a course of action that will be equally satisfactory to all of one's constituents. Indeed, public opinion on planning matters is generally ill-defined,

diverse, contentious, confusing—and decidedly nonlinear. If the welfare economists are correct in their assertion that a legitimate conception of the public interest must be based upon the preferences of each of the society's individual members, then we appear to be out of luck; this conception of the public interest simply isn't workable in the real world.

Other authors have attempted to define the public interest somewhat less rigorously, without concern for the problem of passage from individual to societal preferences. For example, Israel Stollman has written that

Planners serve the public interest primarily...and must fit the client-employer's interest to the public interest or else not serve that client. This guide is needed most when the public interest is hardest to identify. It is needed most, then, when its guidance is least clear.

The public interest is an amalgam of many specific interests. These include serving the interests of democratic majorities; improving the conditions of the weak, poor, or handicapped; protecting resources in the long run; economizing in the use of public funds; living up to our laws; protecting health and safety; preserving human rights—in short, doing all the things that pursue our abiding values.<sup>20</sup>

This is a good list—but it is one person's. Asked to make a list of our society's abiding values, each of us would put our own unique spin on the task, reflecting the values we consider most important.<sup>21</sup> Much as we may concur with Stollman's list of abiding values at this level of abstraction, moreover, our consensus rapidly evaporates as soon as we begin developing specific plans and strategies for achieving these things. One person's action to preserve natural resources is another person's taking; one person's idea for reforming the health-care system is another person's sure-fire method for destroying that system; and so on. Overall, attempts to define the public interest in this manner—by equating it with one or more values of importance to the definer—tend not to be very fruitful (except, of course, for the definer!).

In an article defending the utility of the public interest concept, Klosterman described it as the "collective interest of all" and argued that it is possible to assess this collective interest in an objective and scientific manner—as long as there is agreement on the criterion to be employed.<sup>22</sup> He offers as an example the proposed construction of an urban expressway linking the central city to an affluent

suburb. Should the decisive criterion be economic? Environmental? Distributive? Political? It is possible, he argues, to assess the potential impact of the highway along each of these dimensions, and to make a decision accordingly—as long as there is agreement on the weights to be assigned to the various criteria.<sup>23</sup> His argument is similar to Bergson's, and encounters the same problems. Yes, it would be relatively easy to pursue the public interest if we could achieve consensus on the criteria to be employed. But the selection of a criterion is itself highly subjective, and strongly influenced by the values—and personal stakes—of those who are doing the selecting.<sup>24</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

Where does this leave us, then, with regard to the public interest concept? Does it have a legitimate claim to status as the bedrock of public planning?

Certainly planners continue to use the concept—and to struggle with it. From her interviews with practicing planners, Howe reports that some of them equate the public interest with “environmental, safety, and health regulations and to equal opportunity in housing and employment.”<sup>25</sup> Others relate it to social and economic equity. However, “the most common way that planners articulate their idea of the public interest is to say that it is concerned with the long-term good of the entire community.”<sup>26</sup>

Linda Davis, a Portland, Oregon, planning consultant with considerable public agency experience as well, provides an illustration of this position:

What is the “public interest”? Admittedly, this is hard to define, and the longer you are engaged in the profession the more you see that the world is not black and white, but shades of gray.... Today I like to think of public interest more in terms of “community interest.” This is because the “public” is indefinite geographically and increasingly diverse socially. There is no way we can know all the values and beliefs of this public. However, we can come to know and understand the values and beliefs of our community, our “local public.” Thus, when faced with a difficult situation, ask yourself, “What is good for the community?” This will be an effective guide that will serve you well.<sup>27</sup>

Again, this sounds eminently reasonable, and I suspect that many planners would readily endorse this statement. But wait a moment.

Can the planner really “know and understand the values and beliefs” of everyone in the community? What if some of those values and beliefs are in conflict with one another? If that is the case, whose values and beliefs should prevail? Have planners indeed been authorized to decide what is good for the community? For that matter, can we be certain that we always *know* what is good for the community?

Most people, whether professional planners or not, have ideas about the changes and improvements they would like to see in their community—and many, if pushed on the point, would likely argue that their preferences are indeed in the public interest. But if conceptions of the public interest vary from one person to the next, does the concept really have anything useful to offer as a guide for public action? I suggest that it does not, other than as a rationalization that is sometimes used to justify recommendations for which we can generate no better argument. “Why are you making that particular recommendation?” “Because of all the possibilities that I considered, this one best serves the public interest.” “Oh well, then...” Sometimes this works for us, sometimes it doesn’t—and when it does, it probably shouldn’t.

A municipality introduces major revisions to its zoning ordinance; inevitably, some citizens will benefit while others will be inconvenienced (or worse). A city government fosters major new development on its downtown waterfront; again, there will be winners and losers—the latter including, for example, property owners in other parts of downtown. A revised master plan, a plan for conserving wetlands, plans for a new downtown convention center or performing arts center—each of these, as well as any other significant public initiative, will inevitably distribute its costs and benefits in an unequal manner. Virtually any planning initiative is apt to generate responses from *many* publics, each with its own set of interests—and these varying interests often conflict. Which citizens, then, make up the public whose interests we want to serve? How many people must be benefited before an action is in the public interest? How many must be harmed before we decide to the contrary? These are the sorts of questions that confound the public interest idea and ultimately deprive it of substance and utility.

A community is not a single, monolithic entity. Rather, it is a collectivity of subcommunities (some spatial, some based on shared interests), each with its own special characteristics, values, and aspirations. Each subcommunity, moreover, is itself a collectivity of



individuals, often equally diverse. Since virtually anything we do as planners will benefit some (individuals, organizations, communities, institutions) more than others, we are confronted with two basic questions in any planning situation. First, who should benefit? And second, who should *decide* who benefits? The second question occurs at the intersection of planning and politics, and will be discussed at greater length in later chapters. The first question—who should benefit?—places us squarely in the realm of values, the topic of the next chapter.

I suggest, in fact, that values—those of the planner, and those of the diverse individuals and communities whom the planner serves—constitute the real bedrock of planning. Planners plan, ultimately, because they hold values that impel them to do so. Those values will not always prevail, of course. Virtually everything that is done under the aegis of planning involves a body of divergent values that must ultimately be reconciled sufficiently to justify an action.

Yes, Virginia, there is a public interest—but each of us defines it in our own unique manner, reflecting our own values and interests. A conception of what constitutes the public interest may, then, guide an individual's decisions, but it is not a valid basis for justifying those decisions to others. We would do better to explain our decisions in terms of the values—both ours and those of others—that we are attempting to serve.

## NOTES

1. Richard E. Klosterman, "Arguments for and against Planning," in *Readings in Planning Theory*, ed. Scott Campbell and Susan S. Fainstein (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 150–168.

2. An early and well-argued case for the provision of information as the primary justification for public planning is made in Stephen S. Skjei, "Urban Problems and the Theoretical Justification of Urban Planning," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (March 1976), pp. 323–344.

3. For discussion of this point, see Scott Campbell and Susan S. Fainstein, "Introduction: The Structure and Debates of Planning Theory," in Campbell and Fainstein, *Readings in Planning Theory*, pp. 6–7.

4. Klosterman, "Arguments," p. 155.

5. The wording is Klosterman's; see "Arguments," p. 162.

6. Terry Moore, "Why Allow Planners to Do What They Do? A Justification from Economic Theory," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (October 1978), p. 391.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Klosterman, "Arguments," p. 152.

11. Moore, "Why Allow Planners," p. 390.

12. Elizabeth Howe, *Acting on Ethics in City Planning* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1994), p. 60.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

14. Richard Zeckhauser and Elmer Schaefer, "Public Policy and Normative Economic Theory," in *The Study of Policy Formation*, ed. Raymond A. Bauer and Kenneth J. Gergen (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 40.

15. William J. Baumol, *Economic Theory and Operations Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1965), p. 376.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 380.

18. See Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1963).

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

20. Israel Stollman, "The Values of the City Planner," in *The Practice of Local Government Planning*, ed. Frank S. So, Israel Stollman, and Frank Beal (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1979), p. 18.

21. For example, John Friedmann has equated the public interest with equity, with emphasis on equal access to resources. See "The Public Interest and Community Participation: Toward a Reconstruction of Public Philosophy," *Journal of the American Institute of Plan-*

*ners*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1973), pp. 2–12 (including commentaries by Robert Nisbet and Herbert J. Gans).

22. Richard E. Klosterman, "A Public Interest Criterion," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July 1980), pp. 323–333.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

24. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Susan S. Fainstein, "The Politics of Criteria: Planning for the Redevelopment of Times Square," in *Confronting Values in Policy Analysis: The Politics of Criteria*, ed. Frank Fischer and John Forester (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 232–247.

25. Elizabeth Howe, "Professional Roles and the Public Interest in Planning," *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (February 1992), p. 242.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Linda L. Davis, "Guidelines for Survival and Success," in *Planners on Planning: Leading Planners Offer Real-Life Lessons on What Works, What Doesn't, and Why*, ed. Bruce W. McClendon and Anthony James Catanese (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), pp. 104–105.