

# **The Challenge to Planners: Collaborate or Bust**

**DRAFT**

**By Tovah Redwood**

Planners are in danger of missing the boat on human services. City planning seems to be trapped by a myopia as narrow as the tubes in which planners cart around blueprints. I raise two points: first, planners must define for themselves how they want to be perceived and therefore recognized by their peers, and second, their peers must learn also to think “planner” when they think “counselor,” “social worker,” or “case manager” in dealing with human services. The mere suggestion of associating social services with planning makes some planners recoil in their cubicles. That’s OK; plenty of social workers don’t love planning either. But it is possible to bridge these professions.

As a planner who has crossed over to the world of human services, I can say that for the most part, planners are regarded as technicians and perhaps data keepers. I believe people assume they think in terms of zoning codes and census tracts, and to be sure some of them do. This is hardly the stuff of detox units and truancy prevention, however. In my current planner/social service provider role, I have staffed a county-wide assessment of children’s services, and have reviewed dozens of other models of community assessments of human services. Certain players in the community assessment arena are ubiquitous: mental health professionals, school personnel, clergy, the United Way. All are engaged in analyzing whether people who need social services can get them without too much trouble. These professionals may also work on the same cases together to benefit consumers and to conserve resources. The collaborative processes that include city planners are rare, because planners have not established their value to the other professionals in community collaboratives who ask, “What can they bring to the table?”

Planners can no longer afford NOT to be a part of these collaborations. There is big money in community collaborations, and funding drives program priorities in the social services. I’m not suggesting planners follow money alone. I’m suggesting that they can bring a crucial voice to collaborative processes, and they need to build their professional reputation in the bargain, by determining what they can bring to the table of social service delivery.

## **MAKE NO PLANS IN ISOLATION**

A survey I analyzed a few years ago revealed that most planners perceive “big-picture thinking” as one of their most valuable professional skills. They are right. But how many other professionals realize the extent of training planners receive to focus on the big picture? And how do planners reconcile their big-picture outlook with their widely varied albeit narrowly-focused practices? More importantly, at what point do planners lose the big-picture perspective and fall into the rut of their job description, only to look upon that early training nostalgically, as a relic of

graduate school theory classes? For most planners this probably happens after a few years of processing development applications, writing and presenting staff reports, fielding citizens' complaints, and swallowing back room political agendas with a spoonful of sugar. The reality of local government operations slowly erodes the ideal community planner in all of us.

But planners may take comfort in the fact that they are not alone in this rut. In fact, one of the biggest challenges to community collaborations that try to integrate different types of government services is wrenching people from their professional cubbyholes -- in their minds, in their practices, in their agencies, and in their communities. There's a gap between what theorists tell us about organizational and program change, and how change actually happens -- or doesn't - on the ground.

"Change" brought about through community collaborations may be more difficult than "changing" the built environment. When you retrofit a building or rezone a business district, it's done. While some planners have raised mitigation to new levels, and have demonstrated keen negotiation and people skills in instituting massive land use changes, I've found that changing a line staff function might be more difficult -- particularly several line staff functions simultaneously. As an organization I previously worked for discovered through a redesign of their in-take process, a common, system-wide intake form that is intended to save families time and anguish is only as good as the efforts by staff to use it. A year after the form was supposedly put into use by all major social service providers in the county, we found that case managers were only using it in select cases. The lesson? Conventional city planning, for the built environment, is more cut-and-dried, but human services planning seldom is.

For those planners who were initially attracted to urban design and city planning for it's streamlined simplicity and T-square articulation (and you know who you are), take heed: participation in a collaborative human services planning process means very few right angles. One might even call it a mess within a prescribed framework. Community collaborations illustrate at an institutional and community scale what mental health professionals, teachers, and others have long recognized in individuals and families: people in need of help seldom face one problem in isolation -- substance abuse without mental illness, or mental illness without family dysfunction, for example. As these people need access to several different social services, it would seem merely logical for those service providers to work together. My position, staffing the community assessment, and many others like it, was created to make that logical idea become successful practice. It's not easy.

## **PEOPLE WHO NEED PEOPLE**

The tension between professionals and laypeople that so many planners experience is magnified in collaborative human services initiatives. While people may be passionate about the amount of sunlight in side yards, they're even more passionate placement of their child in an institution. While those emotionally-charged family crises are a small part of my broader, systems-level planning work, they have taught me one of the beauties of collaboration: I can do

my job better with the help of colleagues in allied fields. I have good mediation skills; I am not a social worker. The mess that is the collaborative process is actually made easier through collaboration one step at a time...by building relationships, trust and faith in one person at a time.

Planners can begin to build some of this trust in small but significant ways. They can explain what they mean when using professional jargon, such as “variance” or “elevation”, with laypeople or other professionals. At the same time, planners can learn to understand and use the professional language of their peers; “consumer” is different from “client.” Planners need to understand that “handicapped” or “delinquent” are not only outmoded words but deeply offensive to some. Most of all planners shouldn’t be afraid to admit when they don’t understand.

Most planners would say that they plan for people. As any homeowner who has approached a zoning counter with a request for a garage expansion would tell you, however, planning typically answers first to land use regulations, and second to the people affected by them. The advantage of putting land before people is knowing how land use affects people. That knowledge of how people and the built environment interact through traffic impact studies, census data, and recreation facility use, (aside from “big-picture” thinking), may be the biggest single contribution planners can offer in community collaborations. Human service professionals and other involved in collaborative community assessments may be making decisions that affect land use without the expertise planners can bring to the process.

Consider the about adaptive re-use of warehouses or schools for multi-purpose human service centers? What about building multi-generational facilities? Or the siting of neighborhood health clinics on school grounds? All of these projects have been done successfully, and all have important environmental, transportation, and land use dimensions. Planners add an important voice in enforcing regulations and guiding the development process once the projects are planned and construction begins. More important, planners can add their expertise by participating in the up-front policy discussions of the community assessments that generate these kinds of projects.

## **CONCLUSION**

It’s time for a fundamental re-examination of how planners go about their business. Similar to the overhaul taking place throughout the field of human services, this collective, professional self-scrutiny will be painful. It will call into question planner’s habits, their motivations, and their best and worst practices. I’m not talking about “re-engineering” anything, but rather re-examining, 70 years after *Euclid v. Ambler*, the 1926 U.S. Supreme Court case that sustained the constitutionality of zoning, how the field of planning has evolved.

Stumped -- even today -- for a quick, easy explanation of city planning, I can offer friends and associates, I dismissively say (violating the tenet of a collaborative professional mind set in the process!) that we exist to correct engineers’ mistakes. As collaborative community assessments pass us by, it’s time we consider our own mistakes, and tout our own successes.

Redwood: The Challenge to Planners

*Tovah Redwood has written about planning and community development for local, regional and national publications. As Director of Community Initiatives for a planning affiliate of United Way, she staffed a community assessment of children's services. She now writes full-time from her home in Kansas City, Mo.*