Title:  BETWEEN APATHY AND OUTRAGE - a web-based approach to informing the community about planning

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Introduction

Town planning decisions affect us all in many ways – where and how we live and the pleasantness of our environment; how close we live to jobs, schools, shops and other facilities; and how easy it is to get around the city or town in which we live.

However, most people are apathetic about planning until a specific plan or development application affecting them is publicly notified and an attempt is made to influence the decision. At this stage people are often outraged at what is proposed in their neighbourhood and their objective consideration of the issue is almost impossible.

This paper argues that to achieve effective community engagement in planning it is first necessary to explain how planning works – the planning process and language of planning - without having the distraction of a specific plan or development proposal. If we can first increase understanding about the purpose, benefits and challenges of planning and provide the knowledge and tools for the community to have their say, then the likelihood of more effective community engagement about a particular plan or development proposal is increased.

The challenge is to do this in a cost effective way that reaches a wide section of the community at a time and place of their choosing. One answer is the internet, and this paper describes The Planning Academy’s approach to providing web-based community information about planning.

Community engagement and planning

Town planning has a long and sometimes tortured history of informing and engaging the community, despite it being a fundamental part of planning process.

Planning legislation in each state of Australia embodies a basic principle of democracy society - that the community should have a say about decisions affecting them. Minimum requirements for involving the community include public notice and invitation for submissions relating to new planning schemes; amendments to existing planning schemes; and some development applications. Planning legislation requires minimum public display periods for new planning documents and also requires the content of properly made submissions to be considered by decision makers. In Queensland there are also third party appeal rights for submitters to development proposals.

Many decision makers and some applicants go well beyond these minimum requirements in an effort to involve their communities in planning decisions, particularly in preparing new planning schemes and master plans. Techniques such as focus groups, advisory and reference groups, public forums and workshops, charettes, attitude surveys and on-line feedback are all used to varying degrees. However, these almost invariably relate to a specific plan, policy or proposal.

Despite these excellent consultation techniques, there is still a major hurdle to overcome before effective community engagement is achieved.

A major hurdle for effective community engagement
Genuine consultation and community engagement in planning presupposes a joint understanding by both the proponent and the community of the “rules of engagement”. There are some community members who are very knowledgeable about the planning process, but on the whole, the general public have little understanding of, or interest in planning, even though everyone is affected by planning decisions. Put simply, most people don’t know what we are talking about when we refer to terms like “planning need”, “amenity”, “ecological sustainability” and “planning instruments”! These are not terms the general community understands.

I learned this the hard way some years ago when I engaged some professional actors to play various parts in a role play we were filming about a controversial planning application. We had four characters – a developer, an elected Councillor, a community member and a Council planner. Three of the four actors were fine with the script I had written for them, but the actor playing the part of the Council planner said to me that he couldn’t understand the words I had given him and would have to use an autocue. I rewrote the script for him but it was a salutary lesson for me at the time and ever since I have been conscious to avoid using “planning language” where possible.

Without good communication of planning processes and language, community engagement will always be hampered by misunderstanding and unmet expectations.

I’ve come to the conclusion that most people are either apathetic or outraged about planning. This conclusion comes after 35 years of experience as a local government planner working in both plan-making and development assessment. I’ve seen time and time again the relatively small response received to proposed new planning schemes and policies, compared to the sometimes huge response if a controversial planning application is advertised for submissions.

There’s an implicit assumption in the Queensland planning legislation that people will have greatest input at the plan-making stage when a new planning scheme or amendment to an existing planning scheme is being proposed by the local council. The idea is sound - if community preferences are expressed in plan making, then these plans can be built around community opinions and preferences rather than those opinions and preferences emerging at later stages.

However, in reality this is not what happens. Often, the first time people decide to become involved in planning is when a development application affecting them is publicly notified and an attempt is made to influence the decision. If the application is for a proposal development that complies with all relevant land use controls, the stage has already been set for an approval and it can be difficult to change the outcome.

In reality we often see apathy until a development is proposed, and then outrage can occur! I also know from experience that once people are at the outrage stage, it is almost impossible to have a rational, objective discussion about the issue.

So, what can we do as planners to turn this situation around?

I suggest we need to engage people and help them understand planning BEFORE an issue, or plan, or controversial development proposal arises. We need to move people from apathy to interest before they reach the outrage stage.

One solution
How do we help people understand planning before an issue arises and do it cost effectively to reach most people where and when they want?

One answer is the internet. This is the way to reach wide numbers of people with information about planning easily and cost effectively that they can access at home or through their local library.

In his recently published text, Phil Heywood makes the point that:

“The well-established processes of developing knowledge, by speculation, publication, review and reformulation, can be replicated in the powerful accelerator of the Internet, to the ultimate benefit of all participants”. (Heywood, 2011, p256).

The power of the internet in providing easy access to information, and as an on-line communication and conversation tool, is well known, but let’s look at some statistics.

By the end of October 2010 there were 10.45 million active internet subscribers in Australia (excluding mobile connections) according to the most recently reported ABS Internet Activity Survey. That same survey puts the annual growth in number of internet subscribers at 16.7%, and in the 4 months between end June 2010 and end October 2010 the growth rate was 9.9%.

A different set of statistics is given by Internet World Statistics (www.internetworldstats.com). These figures are for internet users in Australia as a proportion of population in the 10 years since 2000:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Pop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6,600,000</td>
<td>19,521,900</td>
<td>33.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14,729,191</td>
<td>20,434,176</td>
<td>70.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>16,926,015</td>
<td>21,262,641</td>
<td>79.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>17,033,826</td>
<td>21,262,641</td>
<td>80.1 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australia Internet Usage Statistics, July 2011 www.internetworldstats.com

Today, the internet has the potential to reach over 80% of Australia’s population with information about planning at a relatively low cost and at a time and place of their choosing.

Use of the internet for community engagement in planning is increasing, including use of social media. There is also extensive on-line functionality and information, including availability of plans, planning documents and forms, on-line enquiry systems, and ability for lodging and assessing development applications and submissions.

But until now there has not been a central point of easy-to-understand general information about planning designed specifically for the general public.

The Planning Academy is bridging this gap with a set of free web-based resources called Town Planning for Everyone designed to help people better understand the planning process and planning language.

“Town Planning for Everyone”
The Planning Academy is a Queensland based business providing statutory planning knowledge and training across Australia. We offer a wide range of both on-line and face-to-face training courses for government, development industry professionals and the general community.

The Planning Academy’s goal is to increase understanding and knowledge about statutory planning in Australia through delivery of highest quality, most relevant and up-to-date planning courses, continuing education programs and ebooks.

The commercial arm of The Planning Academy provides on-line and face-to-face training courses, DVDs and ebooks.

The not-for-profit arm of The Planning Academy provides community service, information and resources about planning. “Town Planning for Everyone” is part of this service and grew out of a long-held personal interest in better community engagement in planning which was the subject of a Churchill Fellowship study tour I undertook in 1998.

“Town Planning for Everyone” is an attempt to bridge the gap in community understanding of planning through 17 clear, easily understood web-based information tools that are freely available through the Community Resources area of The Planning Academy website www.theplanningacademy.com.au/communityresources.

The information is menu-driven and organised under 3 topics:

1 Understanding the planning system
2 Participating in planning for your area
3 Development approval

The information covered is:

**Understanding the planning system**
1.1 What is planning?
1.2 Planning language
1.3 Important points about planning
1.4 Why land use controls are necessary
1.5 Key stakeholders in the planning system
1.6 Legal framework for planning decisions
1.7 Planning tools

**Participating in planning for your area**
2.1 Future planning for your area
2.2 Why participate?
2.3 Making your voice heard

**Development approval**
3.1 When development approval is required
3.2 Who decides?
3.3 Applying for development approval
3.4 How a development application is assessed
3.5 Commenting on a development application
3.6 Appealing a planning decision
3.7 Special cases

Each information tool includes:

- A short, easy to understand overview of the subject in simple language;
- Hyperlinks to related subjects within each of the Topics;
- Hyperlinks to explanation of planning language used; and
- Hyperlinks to other useful websites and resources, including state planning legislation, government planning departments and local councils.

Response so far

Town Planning for Everyone was posted on the website in mid April this year. At the time of writing, 3 months of data was available in terms of website statistics.

Will we know if these resources are making a difference in the way the community views planning and provides input to the planning process?

The answer is no, but what we are able to track over time is:

- how many people look at the community resources pages,
- where they come from,
- which pages they look at; and
- how much time they spend looking at them.

We will also monitor feedback from users and social media posts to learn what people are saying about the web resources.

Statistics for the first 3 months of posting “Town Planning for Everyone” include:

- 800 visits to the website (72% of them new visits)
- 320 page views of Town Planning for Everyone
- Average time spent on site 3 minutes and rising

These are not high figures but The Planning Academy is a small niche business with relatively little traffic to its website. Awareness of “Town Planning for Everyone” so far has been mainly through word of mouth and distribution through our subscriber list.

In order of number of visits, the most popular information tools so far have been:

1.1 What is planning?
1.2 Planning language
1.6 Legal framework for planning decisions
1.5 Key stakeholders in the planning system

Where to from here?

We hope these community resources will be widely used. The Planning Academy will continue to encourage links to “Town Planning for Everyone” from other websites and to publicise them through conventional and social media.
The information will be added to and amended according to feedback from users through our annual survey of subscribers and through on-line requests and suggestions received. As we become aware of other useful websites on these topics, we will add hyperlinks so that “Town Planning for Everyone” continuously evolves as a one-stop resource for the community about planning.

Statistical information on visitors to the site is monitored on a weekly basis and will inform and encourage cross links to other websites.

**Conclusion**

Town planning has a vital role to play in achieving great cities. Effective community engagement in planning is a vital part of the planning process.

Effective community engagement will only be achieved if the process and language of planning are understood and the community is engaged early - in the absence of a particular issue or plan or development proposal. The internet provides a powerful tool for achieving this early engagement and “Town Planning for Everyone” is one example of this.

Early indications are that “Town Planning for Everyone” is of interest to the community, particularly the information tools on the topics What is planning?, Planning language, Legal framework for planning decisions, and Key stakeholders in the planning system.

“Town Planning for Everyone” will be regularly updated and monitored to ensure it continually evolves as a one-stop resource for the community about planning.

**Reference**