



Women Councillors in planning* decisions – strategies and local networks

*** BY PLANNING WE MEAN PRIMARILY LAND USE PLANNING, WITH A RECOGNITION THAT SUCH PLANNING CANNOT BE EFFECTIVE WITHOUT A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PLANNING FOR PEOPLE, THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE FUTURE.**

Themes emerging from a discussion led by a panel of women in planning with WPILG Coalition members, women Councillors and organization representatives in June 2009. The panel included Gilda DiVincenzo representing the Women's Planning Network, Jane Homewood of Strategic Outcomes Consulting; Liz Johnstone, former Councillor and Mayor of Port Phillip, now Planning Manager MAV. Judith Voce of WPILGC chaired the panel in place of Councillor Beth Ripper.

Following is a summary of strategies and approaches for consideration by Councilors wanting to increase the effectiveness of their participation in planning decisions of their Councils.

Women are critical to local planning - local planning is critical to women.

Many women first engage with their local government because of their passionate interest in a planning issue. Arguably, planning has become one of the major mechanisms for broad based community engagement, and it can bring neighbours together.

Planning is ultimately about giving people voice.

Planning is about the environment and the future - where are you going to live? Where do you want your children to live? What is it about this community which is core? Therefore, a critical partnership has to occur between planning and community development.

Successful community planning tries to answer the question "How do we work with our community to meet our community's needs into the sustainable future?"

“Lots of talking, lots of policy development.”

Over time, land use planning has become more and more complex due to:

- +increasing legislation and interest by the State Government
- + rapid economic growth
- +increased understanding of social and environmental implications.

Improvements in the land use planning area occur when Local Governments are prepared to engage with their communities.

The best advice is “ensure your council’s policies reflect what you as a Local Government want to achieve”. You have a role in setting these policies!

Changing policy can sometimes be “achingly” slow but the process of discussion and community engagement is core to successful land use planning.

Learn to love the big picture.

Be consistent and clear about what you are trying to achieve.

Take advice from council officers.

Stand by your plan, your policy and your staff.

Be able to see where your municipality fits in to the wider region and State.

Show leadership towards a constructive dialogue, e.g. around sensitive issues in social housing.

Adopt a collaborative partnership approach to all land use planning.

Involvement in day to day details could keep Councillors working 72 hours a day, be alert to whether you are getting engaged in relatively short term individual issues rather than the big issues.

Try applying the three gos - "no go, slow-go and go-go" - in relation to development in local areas, based on your knowledge of the physical, environmental and social layout of communities in your municipality.

Staff can be your best allies.

Staff can help to achieve strategic goals and give good advice. They can work with you on issues where you have a particular passion but it requires mutual trust and sensitivity. They need to feel supported in what's usually a minefield of competing interests.

Keep a level of HEALTHY separation between you and hands-on staff which is sensitive to the highly charged political context in which planning occurs. Work out how to work through CEO's and General Managers when the issue is politically difficult.

Be clear with staff that "you are paid to give your best advice, it's for the Councillors to make the political decisions".

Make sure staff are fully supported and well prepared before they go to VCAT. Consider the complexity of the issues in relation to the seniority of the staff. And make sure your policy matches the statement your Local Government wishes to make.

Keep asking the questions; and keep learning the system so you can ask the right questions!

Councillors come in to office wanting to change something, not accept the status quo.

New Councillors can revise all the processes about how to engage with community.

Take courage and keep asking the questions you would like answers to.

At the same time work to build consistency and clarity about long term desired outcomes.

Ask for the information and reports in plain English! Don't put up with "planning speak".

Learn from the findings of VCAT.

Find the best ways to ask questions – whether through the formal administrative structure or informally.

In the Chamber, make sure there are no surprises for officers or other Councillors.

You can use planning decision statistics to inform good policy for the future based on data. The GIS and Planning Permit Activity reports, which can be exported to Google Earth, are immensely useful and immensely underused! (GIS = Geographical Information System). This data can help you answer the questions: What is going on at VCAT and why? Do we have mismatch between our strategic goals and our policies?

Stand by your plan.

Stand by your policy and planning or change it to meet new circumstances.

Learn about land use planning controls and the State legislative framework which surrounds it. Keep up to date.

Devise strategies for sharing information – for example, host regular ward meetings rather than having to field numerous individual phone calls.

Local Government planning cultures can change.

Remember, Councillors can dictate the planning culture!

Ask yourself if you have the people with 3D vision – do Council staff have the ability to visualise what a 2D plan WILL LOOK LIKE IN REALITY.

Support PROMPT decision making, e.g. make and communicate a decision in within the first 14 days if you are going to refuse the application.

Learn and develop the language to communicate with the private sector to partner effectively and ensure return of public good.

In some cases, refusing a planning application knowing that an applicant has recourse to the VCAT appeals system is seductive as a “get us off the hook” option to avoid making a politically unpopular decision. However, you stand to lose local control of the outcomes and the ability to negotiate with developers if you invite a third party to intervene and a permit is approved. This could be worse for the community in the long run.

Change is what Local Government has to manage all the time and we know that in general people do not want change! This includes people within the organisation and in the community.

Provocative questions arising from the forum:

Is it useful if planners are constrained from meeting face to face with applicants to sort things out? How does this affect your ability to find the best solution?

Are your planners inclined to be “for” or “against” big developers? This can prevent Council being able to look at each application on its strategic merits.

Does it contribute to a good outcome if Councillors are forbidden to talk directly with planners? Does this contribute to clarity about Councillor roles and the opportunities to collaborate for a good outcome?

How about the idea that the Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS) is best if it can give land use planners clarity? For example, e.g. “this is a red flag issue for Council”, or “In this I am delegated to make a decision”.

Should developments above a certain size go straight to Managers and/or Council for a quick clear decision?

Is the size of Local Governments a problem? Could working with other Local Governments in your region can be useful mechanism for large-scale projects? Don't underestimate the importance of understanding how people are connected.

Are partnerships with the private sector increasingly critical? Is it possible for Local Governments to exclusively undertake public development in urban areas?

Are you prepared to evaluate development proposals on the basis of what longer term quality you want? Get to know what works and why.

Think about how you engage with developers. Could you meet them as opposed to just sending them a letter telling them what you want? What protections would you need to build in if you do talk with developers? For example, suggest that they brief the entire Council, or take a Senior Officer along.

How about creating a Local Government Awards program for developments that fit Council aspirations?

What impact will the new conflict of interest provisions have? Will they create a new level of formality in discussion between Councillors and community? Will they cloud the ability of Councillors to represent community issues which also affect them personally?

Are some issues simply a "no win" for Council? In these cases is there a place for the State to intervene?

The final words: Planning is about people

Background to the Women's Planning Network (WPN)

The WPN is a network for all sectors involved in land use and holistic planning. It welcomes any members with an interest in planning.

Local Government is a key areas for women to start their careers in planning and can become very influential at the policy level as an officer or Councillor because they work directly with community and at the intersection of the political and administrative ways that land use planning is played out.

WPN is part of the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition because planning is one pathway for women into their Local Government.

Check out the WPN website: www.wpn.org.au

June 2009

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